

And The Oscar Goes To...

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CONGRATULATIONS TO DIRECTOR JENNIFER (REBECCHI) LEE '92 FOR WINNING THE OSCAR FOR BEST ANIMATED FEATURE FILM OF THE YEAR FOR 'FROZEN' ALONG WITH CHRIS BUCK (L) AND PETER DEL VECHO (R) AT THE 86TH ANNUAL ACADEMY AWARDS. PHOTO BY JASON LAVERIS/GETTY IMAGES

Oscar winner Jennifer (Rebecchi) Lee '92 flanked by Chris Buck (l) and Peter Del Vecho (r) at the 86th annual Academy Awards. Photo by Jason LaVeris/GettyImages.

Congratulations to director Jennifer (Rebecchi) Lee '92, who won the 2014 Academy Award for Best Animated Feature for “Frozen” along with Chris Buck and Peter Del Vecho. Lee was featured in the Winter 2014 UNH Magazine cover story UNH Goes to Hollywood, which came out just before the Oscars and has been updated here to reflect the film’s latest honors.

UNH Goes to Hollywood



Screenwriter and director Jennifer (Rebecchi) Lee '92 is living like a princess—the kind of hard-working, modern Disney princess she writes about. In the fall, Lee became the first woman ever to direct a Disney animated feature: "Frozen," one of the biggest box office hits of 2013. With the movie's success, she suddenly became the face of a worldwide Disney publicity blitz, jetting off to the Dubai Film Festival, Mexico City, and Japan, among other places, with co-director Chris Buck. Frozen has collected Golden Globe and Critic's Choice awards for best animated feature, five Annie Awards—including best director and best feature—and two Academy Awards for best animated feature film and best original song ("Let it Go"). All the hoopla has left Lee exhausted, but giddy. "I don't know what to make of it," she says, "except to have moments of 'Wow—is this really happening?'"

Lee is just the latest UNH grad to make a splash in Hollywood, joining Emmy nominees Mike O'Malley '88 and Channing Chase '61; hockey-player heartthrob Michael Ontkian '70, best known as a TV cop on "Rookie" and "Twin Peaks" and for his movie debut opposite Paul Newman in the hockey sendup "Slap Shot"; and hit producer Marcy Peterson Carsey '66. Other UNH alums are working behind the scenes to make Hollywood magic as directors, screenwriters, producers, music producers, and special effects artists.

O'Malley and Ontkian both majored in theater, while a number of the others featured here were English majors. A few majored in disciplines that had nothing to do with movie-making, but turned out to be useful, including nursing, business, math, and computer science. What all these alums have in common is persistence, the ability to withstand repeated rejection, and excellent networking skills. That's what it takes to make a career in Hollywood, where 100 projects flop for every one that succeeds, last year's celebrity is this year's has-been, and everyone is trying to figure out the next big thing.

A Cinderella Story

Lee has enjoyed a rise in the Magic Kingdom as rapid as that of a commoner who marries a prince, thanks in part to a series of opportunities that she was smart enough

to jump on—and talented enough to deliver on. The first was a collaboration with screenwriter Phil Johnston, whom she met on her first day at Columbia's Master of Fine Arts in film program in 2002 and with whom she had remained close friends. In 2011, he tapped Lee to handle the ongoing revisions on his screenplay for Disney's "Wreck-It Ralph." She moved from New York to Los Angeles in a week, and ultimately earned a co-screenwriting credit, an Oscar nomination, and an offer to adapt the Hans Christian Andersen fairytale "The Snow Queen."

Disney had been trying to adapt the story for decades, but it was too abstract and ethereal a tale—until someone suggested that the Snow Queen and the girl who breaks her spell should be sisters. Lee instantly knew that was the right approach and set to work with Buck to hammer out a basic story line. It wasn't long before John Lasseter, Disney's chief creative officer of animation, gave them the green light.

Lee's next big break came when Disney decided to cut the production timetable for "Frozen" from the standard four years to three. She got bumped up from screenwriter to co-director so she could sign off on script changes, while Buck, a former animator and story artist, worked on the visual environment.

In a twist on the classic formula of a princess saved by a chivalrous prince, "Frozen" features a young princess, Anna, whose love for her queenly sister, Elsa, thaws two frozen hearts. Lee, who followed her own older sister, Amy Rebecchi Kaier '90, from Rhode Island to UNH, says she identifies most closely with Anna. "Elsa is larger than life, like my big sister," Lee says. Anna "makes a lot of mistakes, puts her foot in her mouth, she's not the most polished girl, she's average in every way, and yet I like that she does something extraordinary."

"Extraordinary" is a pretty good description of Lee's career so far. Fans have made "Frozen" a box office hit, and critics give it a strong chance to win the Academy Award for best animated feature. As for Lee herself, Variety recently named the former English major one of its Top 10 screenwriters to watch.

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