

FRANK BEDDOR

Author, World Creator, Film Producer, Creative Executive, Principal of Automatic Pictures

Frank Beddor had scaled the heights of professional skiing (as a two-time freestyle world champion) and filmmaking (as producer of the 1998 hit “There’s Something About Mary”) before deciding to become an author (of the *New York Times* best seller “The Looking Glass Wars,” the first volume of a like-titled trilogy). This transformation was born of “an odd, empty feeling” and a serendipitous whisper of inspiration.

After the global success of “There’s Something About Mary,” he formed Automatic Pictures, over which he still presides, to develop creative properties. “After ‘Mary’ I put a bunch of projects into development,” he says. “At the same time, though, I was coming to realize that, as a producer, you’re a facilitator for the creative team, but what I really wanted to be was a creator. Once that seed had been planted in my mind, it was impossible to shake it loose. Of course it’s great to have a hit; it’s great to make money, but the work I was doing was not satisfying me.”

Meanwhile, another seed was germinating. While in London for the U.K. premiere of “There’s Something About Mary,” Beddor visited the British Museum. “It was a fateful trip,” he attests, explaining: “I came upon this exhibit of ancient cards – playing cards, Tarot cards, illuminated cards, cards Napoleon had hired artists to create illustrating his victories. There was also an incomplete deck that intrigued me. The images reminded me of ‘Alice in Wonderland,’ but they were more mysterious and twisted, much more gothic. After that, I couldn’t stop thinking about those cards. Through a series of events, I met an antiquities dealer who owned the remaining cards from that deck. And the story he told me – as he revealed one card at a time, each with this incredible imagery – is the basis for the ‘Looking Glass Wars’ trilogy.”

“The Looking Glass Wars” became a sensation in the U.K. when it debuted there in 2004. At long last, it revealed how Lewis Carroll, author of “Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland,” had willfully misrepresented the story of seven-year-old Alyss Heart, betraying the exiled princess of Wonderland by turning her painful history into a fairytale, when, in fact, it is a dark and dangerous depiction of familial treachery, thwarted love, and the despotic domination of imagination.

The first volume was discovered by a devoted legion of readers, many of whom are what the publishing industry calls “young adults.” Beddor says he’s largely measured the success of “The Looking Glass Wars” by the intensity and curiosity of the fans who reach out to him with comments and questions. Their input led to the creation of “Hatter M,” a series of graphic novellas depicting the journey of Alyss’ faithful bodyguard, Hatter Madigan, who, for 13 years, has searched for his mistress after becoming separated from her in The Pool of Tears, the portal from Wonderland to our world.

In fact, the world Beddor has created with “The Looking Glass Wars” sprawls well beyond the bounds of traditional genre literature. In addition to the “Hatter M” series, “LGW” extends to a companion album of original songs; a card game; an online and forthcoming offline multiplayer role-playing video game; an apparel line; a proposed theatrical musical; and even a teaser trailer, the latter representing the first time a state-of-the-art special-effects trailer has been created to promote a book. All of these projects fall under the aegis of Automatic Pictures, for which Beddor is also developing film treatments of “The Looking Glass Wars.”

“The readers have sought out and embraced these other destinations in the ‘LWG’ world,” he says, “because we’ve stayed true to the story and to the medium of each creative tributary.” This holistic methodology, conceived to satisfy fans in exploring the far reaches of the “LWG” universe, has also proven to be a savvy marketing strategy. One does not need to have read the novel to enjoy “Hatter M” or the “LWG” “soundtrack,” for instance, but immersion in the various offshoots greatly enhances the experience of “The Looking Glass Wars” overall and has, of course, driven sales of the book. This has not been lost on intellectual-property rights-holders; Beddor has been recruited to write the story of the upcoming film based on the classic board game Monopoly – and to apply his holistic methodology to its creative and marketing development.

Before realizing his destiny as a creator of fantastic worlds, Frank Beddor inhabited the small-town Midwest of this world, having been raised in Excelsior, Minn., not far from Minneapolis. “It was a great place to grow up,” he attests. “There were two things that were particularly memorable: an old-fashioned amusement park with an amazing wooden rollercoaster and The Old Log Theater, which still exists and still does great work.” His mother had been in a number of college productions, and during Frank’s early years, the Beddor family availed itself of The Old Log, the nearby Chanhassen Dinner Theatre and Minneapolis’ famed Guthrie Theater.

Frank’s father was part serial entrepreneur, part impresario. One of his pursuits – a traveling water-ski show (featuring ice-follies girls, a one-legged boy and a death-defying jump through fire) – suggests what Frank calls his “charismatic and adventurous” nature. Among other feats of derring-do, the senior Beddor is known for having set a world record skiing the length of the Mississippi River dressed as Paul Bunyan (to promote Minneapolis’ Paul Bunyan Land) and motorcycling to South America with his 150-lb. Great Dane riding in a specially outfitted box mounted above the rear wheel. “My childhood was filled with water skiing and skydiving and night scuba in Mexico. These things seemed normal,” Franks says. “I thought everyone learned how to barefoot-ski at 12.”

Having learned how to snow ski at four and water ski at six, barefooting at 12 did follow a certain logic. Frank began training for his professional skiing career close to home. “At first, my dad just pulled me around the driveway,” he recalls. “But then I built a jump. I’d ski around two houses, come down a hill, then jump toward the lake we lived on. I would do these somersaults and other stunts, making sure to stay out of view of my mother. By the time I was in high school, I was ranked nationally in freestyle skiing.”

“I was not a terribly popular kid; I was never in the cool crowd,” he confides. “But then I became successful in skiing, and I had something to hold onto. Skiing gave me the confidence to take chances and in that sense, has allowed me to pursue all the things I’m doing now.” After winning the Nationals, he was invited to join the Olympic ski team (though freestyle skiing would not become an official Olympic event until years later). The team trained near the University of Utah, where Beddor attended college. He went on to tour Europe – competitive skiing is almost as big as soccer on the Continent – and twice be named world champion. He retired from skiing at 23 for a variety of reasons, not least of which, he says, was because, “I’d done it.”

As an international sports star, Beddor was afforded endorsement opportunities, which found him appearing in commercials for national brands like Northwest Airlines, Nikon and Juicy Fruit. Becoming an actor was clearly the next step. He appeared as John Cusack’s skiing stunt double in the beloved teen comedy “Better Off Dead” (1985) and opposite Carrie Fisher in the “Kentucky Fried Movie” sequel “Amazon Women on the Moon” (1987), directed by Joe Dante. He moved to Los Angeles during this period and acted in several theater productions, for which he earned favorable reviews. He also studied with revered acting coach Stella Adler.

As an exercise, Adler encouraged her students to write the previously unwritten scene their characters are in *before* they actually step onstage. Says Beddor: “I found this to be really gratifying and compelling because this was something *I* could generate. That’s when I discovered that I loved writing. I especially loved some of the English playwrights – Tom Stoppard, Harold Pinter, Noel Coward. Studying their work and imagining and writing my own scenes for their plays was a turning point toward being a fiction writer.”

As Beddor soon discovered, much of being an actor is waiting for the right script to come along. This frustrated him and ultimately set him on his path to producing. “I think I was feeling the can-do spirit I got from my dad

growing up,” he notes. “He produced these shows. Whatever he did, even straight business, there was a show that went along with it. Putting together a movie seemed like a natural progression from that.”

Adhering to the time-tested adage “Write what you know,” he came up with a ski story based on the World War II exploits of the U.S. Army’s 10th Mountain Division, which he would later pitch as “‘The Dirty Dozen’ on skis.” “I had this high-concept idea and I did all the research and I went to Colorado to meet the guys from the 10th Mountain Division and I bought the rights to their story,” he informs. He then wrote a letter proposing the film to producers Kathleen Kennedy and Frank Marshall, whom he knew were avid skiers and owners of a home in Telluride, Colo. He remembers that his friends ribbed him for sending a letter – not exactly standard practice in Hollywood – but he had the last laugh when The Kennedy/Marshall Company signed on and took the project to Paramount. When a satisfactory script failed to emerge, however, the film was shelved, but by then, says Beddor, “That project had become my calling card.”

He did get a film off the ground in 1998, “Wicked,” which he affirms was most notable for introducing actor Julia Stiles and screening at the Sundance Film Festival. “It was a fantastic experience because I learned absolutely everything, good and bad,” he says.

And then along came “Mary.” After arriving in L.A., Beddor had taken a UCLA literature class on Shakespeare’s plays. There he met Ed Decker and John Strauss, the original writers of “There’s Something About Mary.” He’d called them when he first started producing to ask what had happened with the script. “That thing is so dead,” they told him. Beddor proceeded to buy it out of turnaround.

He picks up the narrative: “Around that time, the Farrelly Brothers had finished a script called ‘The Loser.’ I knew them, and they knew Ed and John. They came up with the idea of combining some of the elements of ‘The Loser’ with ‘Mary,’ and it worked. Now I had the script and the Farrelly Brothers committed. I went to Sundance, and it had been my experience in past years that all the executives wanted to ski with me – it was the one place I could demand their undivided attention. I got on a chairlift with an exec from Fox, and when we got off, he said, ‘Send me the script; I’m going to make this happen.’ That was my first and only pitch for the movie. Six months later we were shooting in South Beach, and three months after that we were in theaters.”

“There’s Something About Mary” was a critical and box-office success (\$360 million worldwide), remains a perennial rental favorite, and launched enduring pop-cultural touchstones about stuck zippers and hair gel. And yet, Beddor could not ignore the aforementioned “odd, empty feeling” he got from not being the creative engine of his subsequent projects.

After his epiphany at the British museum and tête-à-tête with the antiquities dealer – during which, he says, “I felt the story he told me about the cards was for my ears only, that this was my destiny” – his path began to unfold. “At first I thought of it as a movie,” he notes. “But it was so rich, and the world I was creating was so vast, that I began to feel the story must first be told in a book; I didn’t believe that a movie could contain this ball of energy that needed to be realized. Some of my favorite authors, Tolkien, Phillip Pullman (“His Dark Materials”), Norton Juster (“The Phantom Tollbooth”), were world creators, and I took a lot of inspiration from them.” He labored for two years, essentially in secret to avoid explanations and expectations, mapping his Wonderland before ever writing a word. “I asked myself constantly, ‘What are the rules? What is the logic? What is the back story? How does it all work?’”

Because his experience in storytelling had been in film, he frequently thought of the project in visual terms. “Early on I hired a concept artist, Doug Chang, who’d done the concept art for the second three ‘Star Wars’ films. I said to him, ‘Okay, card soldiers – what do they look like?’ Then I worked with another artist who specialized in environments; I said, ‘The Valley of Mushrooms, the Chessboard Desert – what do they look like?’” So I collaborated with them to develop these aspects of the story, which was like producing a film, but the nuts and bolts of writing was a very solitary pursuit.”

Beddor spent five years writing “The Looking Glass Wars” – only to have it rejected by every major publisher in the U.S. When it was released in 2004 by the U.K. publisher Egmont Books, however, it became a sensation (file

the outrage of Lewis Carroll purists under “There’s no such thing as bad publicity”). The first book of the trilogy was issued Stateside in 2006 by Penguin (which had passed on the project four times before its triumph in the U.K.). The second volume, “Seeing Redd,” will be published simultaneously in the U.S. and U.K. in August of 2007.

Beddor attributes the success of the book largely to the online activity of its fans, who seem content to endlessly review, comment on and speculate about the trilogy, and to the presentations he makes at schools. “Because I love theater and I’d had this experience as an actor, I thought it would be fun to do an alternative kind of book tour for teenagers,” he remarks. “I’ve seen authors read to kids and put them asleep, and that’s exactly what I didn’t want to do. So when I go to schools, I display the cards that inspired the trilogy – I finally bought the entire deck – and act out my encounter with the antiquities dealer; I show them the concept art and the teaser trailer; I ask who should play Alyss and Dodge in the movie and audition kids on the spot; I ask them who among their teachers is best suited to play Her Imperial Viciousness, Queen Redd, and her shape-shifting henchman, the Cat. We have a blast.”

Classroom hijinks aside, Beddor is winning young hearts and minds for the cause of literacy. He reports: “I’ve heard that after my presentations, kids ask their parents to buy them the book, and the parents call the school and say, ‘My son wants me to buy him this book. He’s never been much of a reader – what’s going on?’ Making a connection with reluctant readers is a very big deal.”

Asked about his plans for the film treatment of the “LGW” trilogy, Beddor says: “I’m working on the script for the ‘Hatter M’ comic book, which is a companion piece to ‘The Looking Glass Wars,’ so those become one story, and we’re also working on the script for ‘Seeing Redd.’ The great thing is that the movies will be the cherry on top of this cake, not the cake itself. In order to protect the story and my Alyss, I need to establish all these other creative entities and make sure they are solid first. If you rush into the film, it’s very hard to do it well. I’ve seen it happen: A terrible movie comes out and essentially kills the underlying property. It’s critical that ‘The Looking Glass Wars’ be allowed to continue to develop organically, at its own pace. I’m thinking very long term.”

Speaking of the long term, Beddor ventures: “The greatest satisfaction I’ve had in this whole endeavor is that I had faith in the story, and I had faith in the readers, and the two have found each other. By coming together with the first novel and the comic book, the readers are helping me write the next chapter. It’s not every day you find a project you want to devote years of your life to; you’re lucky if you experience that once in your life. And when you do, whatever the content might be, for you, personally, it’s a love story.”

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