

## John Dods Interview

Written by Marc Spess

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Written by: [Kelly Wold](#)

After a long career as a filmmaker and prosthetic make-up artist for both movie and stage, John Dods is turning his focus towards an animation project that has been in the works for 30 years.

Forest Story is a visual feast for the eyes, with its' fast paced movements, smooth transitions and lively music. Shot and animated years before, John has returned to his creation to transfer it into the digital era. I had the pleasure of speaking with the solo creator and producer of Forest Story, and this is what he had to say...



**AC:** *What are you currently working on?*

**JD:** I've just finished a 3 year long job providing the prosthetics for the Monster in Mel Brooks stage musical "Young Frankenstein" - for which I'm the Prosthetics Designer. I'm taking a year off to finish tweaking my 30 year old project FOREST STORY and make sets and models for my new HD animation THE RETURN OF GROG. This has been a very productive week - my assistant Leanne Catena and I just made 20 epoxy-Hydrocal molds to be used making models for the new project.

**AC:** *Tell me more about Forest Story.*

**JD:** FOREST STORY is a 12 minute fairy tale which I shot 30 years ago on Ektachrome reversal film with a 16mm Bolex camera. I wanted to make a puppet film filled with wild unexpected movement, fast cutting, and synchronous music - all things that puppet films didn't offer when I grew up in the 60's and 70's - the Rankin-Bass era of TV specials. They were often charming but too static and stylized for my taste. But FOREST STORY wasn't paying any bills, so it sat unfinished on a shelf for decades while I enjoyed several careers as a practical effects artist for film and theatre. A year ago - when I turned 63 -I thought 'It's now or never' - soon I'll be too old to do stop motion - the kind of work I think I do best. So I've finally put FOREST STORY through post production. I had the camera original digitally transferred and did the editing - adding sound, music, transitions, and special effects with Premiere Pro software. There was so much dirt on some of the frames that I had to put much of the film into Photoshop and individually retouch many hundreds of frames. That part took months!

**AC:** *What got you interested in stop motion?*

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**JD:** Even as a child, I wanted to make movies and create a world that I could control completely - using Disney style animation techniques. Most boys love Harryhausen - I did too - but I loved Disney even more. But I soon realized that a large army is needed to create the look of a FANTASIA or a PINNOCCHIO. When I read about the 1933 KING KONG in "Famous Monsters of Filmland" I got very excited realizing that making a world of models and miniatures just might be within my abilities. I hated my first 8mm stop-motion efforts because the technical quality was horrible - the image was soft, the registration shaky. I worked in a retail store for a year until I could afford to buy a Bolex 16mm camera. Watching the first 100' feet of Bolex footage - ultra sharp and crisp with it's famous rock steady registration - was like a religious experience.

**AC:** *Do you make all of your sets for your stop motion shorts?*

**JD:** Yes for FOREST STORY - which is my 'auteur' film - although many of the backgrounds are large rear projections. Before the green screen became common, the rear projection of 35mm slides was a great way to create a realistic backdrop and minimize set construction. My new project, THE RETURN OF GROG won't utilize rear projection. I'm using green screen and conventional

miniatures and I've enlisted the skills of several talented artists and model makers - most notably the late, great illustrator Tim Hildebrandt, who keyed the look for the film and painted several murals for it before he passed away several years ago. Sculptors Mark Alfrey, Eric Sonntag, Mike Defeo, and myself have all worked on the models (Note: all of the aforementioned have Facebook pages and websites).

**AC:** *The miniature "Ice Age" set you made for Universal, how big was it?*

**JD:** The "Ice Age" set, built for "Back To the Future: The Ride" was about 35'x40'. My job was to oversee the budget, figure out what to make the set out of, and supervise the construction - with up to 6 sculptors - me included - working on it at the same time. A very high level of detail was needed because it was being shot on the gigantic "Omnimax" film format that is 4x larger than a 35mm frame. The set was very low tech - a wood substructure covered with chicken wire and burlap soaked in plaster. After a 1" thickness of plaster was built up, the sculptors would chip away at it with a hammer and chisel - creating a hard-edged Himalayan style Mountain range look. It was airbrushed with latex house paint (cheaper than artist's acrylic). The snow was baking soda. The amazing Ron Cole was one of the artists working on this set.

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**AC:** *Was that the largest set you've made so far & how does your Forest Story set measure up?*

**JD:** Oh yes, "Back To the Future" was definitely the biggest - a real 'bigature'. We all loved the set. I would sit and eat lunch just staring at it - I thought it was so beautiful. A few of the FOREST STORY sets were about 25' deep. I used to have the world's biggest basement and often made full use of it.

**AC:** *What type of clays, rubber, and resins do you tend to use/prefer in your creation of characters/puppets?*

**JD:** I use a variety of products such as Monster Clay, Epoxical mold-making epoxy, Ultracal 30 + Acryl 60, GI-1000 mold making silicone, GM Foam Rubber, Artist's Acrylic paints + Prosaide makeup adhesive. I'm experimenting with Plastil Gel-10 silicone for stop motion - which I've also used for masks and prosthetics.

**AC:** *What type of armatures do you prefer to use?*

**JD:** I buy or make them, but I'm not a very good machinist. When I can afford it, I hire Jeff Taylor to build the important characters, and have also used Tom Brierton's - which are excellent for the modest cost - or Ken Walker's. I often make aluminum wire armatures - which can be far superior to poorly machined ball and socket joints. I think that the animator makes the animation good - it isn't the armature.

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**AC:** *Was it a natural progression to segue into prosthetics work? Can you tell me more about that?*

**JD:** A very natural progression - even though I didn't begin to do prosthetics till my late 30's. I'd been sculpting, mold making, animating, and fabricating for nearly 20 years - never making a steady living at any of it - when - at the age of 39 - I decided to fulfill a longtime ambition to learn prosthetic technique and take the Dick Smith Makeup Course in 1988. Well, I took the course and suddenly the work offers became nonstop - it went on for 24 years - most of it prosthetic makeup related - often for Broadway shows like "Beauty and the Beast", "Mel Brooks Young Frankenstein" and "The Toxic Avenger Musical". All during that time, I never stopped planning my animation projects.



**AC:** *What are your plans for the future?*

**JD:** To give FOREST STORY - now essentially completed - a final polish and send it out into the world. There are some FS excerpts now posted on YouTube and AnimateClay.com. This year, I'll be working a lot on my new RETURN OF GROG project. I'll post photos and videos as they become available. Stop motion filmmaking is the only work I've found that uses everything I know how to do. After a 30 year interruption, it's time that I got back to it.

**AC:** *Any closing thoughts/statements for fellow stop motion enthusiasts new and experienced alike?*

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**JD:** In 1985 "Cinemagic Magazine" published the headline: "Is Stop Motion Dead?" It looked certain, way back then, that computer imagery was going to make Willis O' Brian's amazing technique for animating synthetic dinosaurs as extinct as the real things. But it didn't happen. We now know that for every kind of animation - this is a Golden Age and that stop motion - now with computers in tow - is better than ever - much like a Phoenix that's just beginning to spread its wings. I think that the best time for stop motion filmmaking is right now and, to me, there is no better way for time to be spent.

Thank you John for taking the time to speak with us – and for allowing us a glimpse inside your process. I look forward to seeing both the completed Forest Story and The Return of Grog.

**AC:** *[For more information, high quality pictures and videos related to this article visit [John Dods stop motion page over here](#)*

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