

Jump Cut

By George T. Marshall

(December 2006) My friend, Larry and I were doing a bit of shopping in the early Fall looking for a present for his mom's upcoming birthday. While at a local BJ's, I happened upon a small palette of toys awaiting for their display as holiday gifts. They caught my attention as they were a tie-in to new film slated for a mid-November release. I recognized them immediately.

For the past year, anyone attending a film at a motion picture theatre saw a startlingly real looking animation that seemed a comic spin on last year's popular documentary, "March of the Penguins." Unlike that film, these were loud and musically inclined animals featuring the voices of some of our more popular actors: Elijah Wood, Robin Williams, Brittany Murphy, Hugh Jackman, Nicole Kidman, Hugo Weaving, Anthony LaPaglia, Magda Szubanski and Miriam Mirgoyles. The Warner Bros. Pictures feature film directed by George Miller of "Babe" fame is called "Happy Feet."

The film's message: it is possible to be different, beautiful and special all at the same time while being yourself.

So, here in front of me at BJ's were three unique toy penguins that were voice activated. They danced, sang and spoke. One was called "Gloria," and since that just happens to be Larry's mom's name, a bell went off. This was definitely going to be her gift from me.

Gloria turned out to be a hit. She now has a place of honor in the family kitchen and every morning entertains Larry's parents. Who would have thought that a child's Christmas toy would resonate with adults. And both are anxious to see the film when it is released.

Now that's what I call successful marketing.

So, it didn't take much to decide that I wanted to learn more about the film. What was it that touched such a chord with children—of all ages? What techniques were used in its creation? How were the penguins created in such a photo-realistic fashion? How were the dances achieved?

According to the promotional material for the film, "Happy Feet" is set deep in Antarctica. Into the land of Emperor Penguins, where each needs a heart song to attract a soul mate, a penguin is born who cannot sing. The film's hero Mumble, son of Memphis and Norma Jean, and he is the worst singer in the world ...however, as in all fantasies, it just happens that he is a brilliant tap dancer!

Original music composed for the film is by Prince. Other featured musical performances are by Nicole Kidman, Hugh Jackman, Brittany Murphy, Fantasia, and The Beach Boys.

All of the musical numbers in the film have been choreographed by Savion Glover; a performer, choreographer, director, and producer. He is the 1996 Tony Award winner in choreography for "Bring in 'da Noise, Bring in 'da Funk" on Broadway. Additional Broadway credits include "The Tap Dance Kid," "Black and Bue," and "Jelly's Last Jam."

So just who is Savion Glover how did his credentialed Broadway experiences morph into what became thousands of dancing penguins with a penchant for musical expression?

Here's what I learned...

GTM: What was your initial reaction when you got the call about this job? It's not quite every day you asked to create the moves for a dancing penguin?

SAVION GLOVER: Well, when I got this call about my involvement, I immediately wanted to meet this guy, George Miller, because I said to myself, "Wow, this has to be the coolest guy, you know, on the Earth, the coolest director, who wants to do a film about tap dancing penguins." I thought it was very cool. I was fascinated, by the whole idea.

GTM: Did you do any research? Did you watch any penguin documentaries, study their movements or their style?

SAVION GLOVER: I started to do, more research when I got here. I didn't do any, I guess prior to, but... well, I spent time, you know, looking at film, like you said, different documentaries. Kelley, the choreographer and also another dancer, was very, helpful as far as my becoming this penguin.

GTM: You just don't carry a piece of equipment with you: It's attached. Could you talk about the musician part of what you do and how it can do every emotion.

SAVION GLOVER: My feet are my instrument, basically, not only a drum, but, you know, a harp sometimes, a flute, timpani's, whatever I think of, whether it be a, a single tone or chord, a drum roll or drum flam; it all comes out through my feet.

So feeling, sad, emotions, all, all these things ... it's my language. It's my way of expressing myself. And, I'm very grateful that I'm able to do this, and then to maintain the art form. I feel very honored and privileged to be a part of the culture and the art form known as tap dancing.

GTM: One of the main themes of the film is that the character you inhabit, Mumble, the hero, can't sing. But he can dance like no one else.

SAVION GLOVER: Yeah. [LAUGHS] Yeah.

GTM: But he's not appreciated. Can you talk about that theme of belonging, and of being true to yourself?

SAVION GLOVER: To me, it's sort of exposing people in a way that is, I guess not cool; who's real, who's not, who can sing. If you can't sing, you're not going to make much of yourself or something like this. I think it's all false. We all have our own means and ways of expression, whether it be through literal, consent, or camera. If you want to direct, you want to be a carpenter, you want to be a photographer, or you want to be a doctor...

That's how you express yourself. Artists. You want to be a painter, or whatever. It's all accepted and in my mind, it should be all accepted because we're all individual. And we all have many talents that we don't even know, [LAUGHS] we have [that] we haven't discovered yet, and we probably won't discover in this lifetime.

We all should be accepted as just human beings regardless of our talents. And I think in this movie, Mumble, I can relate [LAUGHS] to him a lot, because I am true to my art form, which is tap dancing. I'm not a wonderful singer. You know, I've tried it. I'll continue to have a go at it, but, no, I'm best, expressed through the feet, just like Mumble.

SAVION GLOVER: You know, he comes in this one scene when he has one of his little friends sing behind him, like, he's trying to sing in order to impress Gloria, his mate. And he realizes "It's not me. You know, I'm not a singer. I'm a dancer." So I think it's important for us, outside the movie, just to remain true. Remaining true means sacrifice. So, you have to be ready to remain true.

GTM: And it's a good lesson for adults to relearn and it's a great lesson for us to teach our kids.

SAVION GLOVER: Sure.

GTM: Stay true to yourself. Mumble's father says to him, "Stop the freakiness with your feet." Mumble says, "I can't. That's who I am." It's a wonderful thing.

SAVION GLOVER: Yeah, it is.

GTM: This process of motion capture...

SAVION GLOVER: Mm-hmm.

GTM: Have you ever done anything like this before?

SAVION GLOVER: They are really mathematical. Just the other day, I got this tutorial on just numbers, where you know, when you're dealing with volume. We can't be in this square, or if you're out of the square, you're out of the volume. If

you are a little bit to the left of a number, all of these numbers or whatever have to, has to be rearranged. It's, like, it's out. It's really out.

These guys have got my utmost respect. Greg, Francois... the geeks... [LAUGHS] The true "brainiacs," man. I have never been around anything like this in my life. The whole suit, you know, [for motion capture] the markers and everything. I guess 50 or 100 lights or cameras going on. It's really amazing. It's really amazing.

GTM: Other than keeping in the position that they need you to be in, is it restrictive at all in any way? Does it limit you?

SAVION GLOVER: Mm-hmm. No, actually, there are no limitations because there's this huge, huge storyboard. We're actually the figures on the storyboard, basically, and we have all of the room we need, sometimes too much room. We have to, uh, compensate for the, for the amount of space we use. But again, it's cool. No restrictions at all. Once we're inside of the space, it's huge. It's huge.

GTM: Is there room for improvisation in what you're doing?

SAVION GLOVER: Oh, yeah! I am basically an "improvisationalist." If it weren't for the video camera that they had to remind me of what I was doing at times, then this whole, [LAUGHS] movie from my point would be improvisation. But there is a ton of room. George Miller really allowed that because when he came to me, he was, like, "We want... I want... your style."

"I want the funkiness, I want the raw... all of the things about your style." And that was really cool, and rather enlightening for me. So yeah, There was room for improvisation.

GTM: Were you surprised at all the way the animators incorporated some of your personal moves and noises into Mumble?

SAVION GLOVER: Oh, yeah. I was just watching the clip and it made me excited. I can't wait to see the whole thing. But again, just the whole relationship between the motion cap[ture] and the animation, all of that stuff to me is just amazing. It's unlike anything I've ever been a part of. Again, numbers, it was like math.

To see myself as a penguin, it's funny... [LAUGHS] It's really funny, you know. You can... as I work with the different dancers and everything; "Oh, okay, that's so-and-so. That's such-and-such." You start to see their characteristics inside of this penguin outfit; it's quite funny. [LAUGHS]

GTM: And it's immediate gratification. I mean, it's going into the computer as you are doing it. You can see it right away.

SAVION GLOVER: Mm-hmm. Yeah.

GTM: Can you talk about the importance of music in everyone's life, regardless of whether you are a professional musician?

SAVION GLOVER: Well, music, thank God for music. People find themselves in music, through music.

I don't care what type of person you are, there's a song that you put on, that we put on and say, "You know what? This is me." [LAUGHS] "This is how I feel." Whether you're feeling down and out, you lost your love, or whether you're feeling up and just found your love--the greatest love--music is life.

Music is whether we sing, or dance; it's rhythmical, everything. Our heartbeat. Our walk. Our talk. You know, It's, like somebody like John Coltrane, to me... at times, it's like you hear the syllables, [LAUGHS] through his music.

GTM: And with your feet being your instrument...

SAVION GLOVER: Mm-hmm.

GTM: They're able to express any emotion that you need to.

SAVION GLOVER: Any emotion, I guess that is in me, will soon come out, [LAUGHS] through life and I've found I've been able to express myself. But it all winds up good, happy, you know. Because it's an outlet; you get all of the dirt and whatever you have to get out, you get it out. And it feels good to just release yourself, and come back.

GTM: One of the moments that I like best in the film is -- I don't know what you call it -- is it "match dancing"? It's when you do a step, and everyone around you repeats it back to you.

SAVION GLOVER: Call and response. Yeah, t's call and response. Conversation, basically: "Hey, how ya doin'?" "Everything's cool." "How was your day?" "My day was fine, and you?" It's call and response. You know, it's communication.

You go back to the early days when, [DRUMS RHYTHM ON HIS KNEES] and someone did some drum thing or blew a horn way on the other side of the town, and people knew, "Oh, okay. Someone's getting married right now. It's time to, [LAUGHS] go to the wherever." But again, it's communication, call and response, conversation.

GTM: Loved that.

SAVION GLOVER: Yeah. Yeah.

GTM: One of George's hopes for this film is that people will get up and dance in the theatre. Every once in a while something comes up, a movie comes out, a

play, and there's a little bit of a resurgence and a revival. Would it be your hope that tap dancing makes yet another comeback?

SAVION GLOVER: Oh, yeah. I mean, this is a tap dance movie. Okay. I've come to realize that. This is another movie about tap dancing. And it is a hit. [LAUGHS] It's really cool. And I was just watching some clips; it's funny. [LAUGHS] It's a really cool movie.!

I know that it's going to spark this generation... I'm dealing with the new generation of young adults that we have. All of this, again, technology, animation, everything is accessible... yeah, definitely a resurgence again of tap dancing.

The kids, the children, like, they're going to see this tap dancing penguin, they're going to say, "Oh, that's... [LAUGHS] that's either too funny or too cool." [LAUGHS] They're going like it. You know what I mean? I'm just grateful, again, and honored to be a part of this. I know there are many great hoofers and tap dancers just looking down saying, "Thank you. Thank you. Thank you."

To learn more about the film or to find out about it's screening venues, go to the website at - www.happyfeetmovie.com

About the Author:

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