



PETER CULLEN INTERVIEW

Optimus Prime / Ironhide / Streetwise / Nightstick / Slugslinger and others.

Born in Toronto Canada, Peter Claver Cullen's voiceover credits are many and varied. He has been associated with scores of animated movies and television series, but undoubtedly his two most famous characters are Eeyore, the lachrymose stuffed donkey in the Winnie the Pooh cartoons, and of course, the leader and guiding spirit behind the Transformers, Optimus Prime. Peter and I spoke over drinks at a North Hollywood watering hole.

DG: Many actors have an 'aha' moment when they realize they want to make their living in show business. Did you have such a moment?

PC: There are too many of them to name. At least a dozen affirmations of the same feeling. In grade school, getting a laugh in class, and saying, well that feels good. Then on stage to have a thousand people in total silence waiting on you, there's magic in that, and once you experience that you're toast, you're done, your goose is cooked.

DG: You worked in radio in Canada.

PC: CBC

DG: On a very popular show called, “Funny You Should Say That.”

PC: Oh yeah. Live.

DG: You played Giles.

PC: (Correcting my pronunciation) Jil.

DG: Sorry, Jil. You were the French Canadian and your wife was the English Canadian. That was the set up.

PC: Right.

DG: Joan Stewart played your wife.

PC: How do you know all this stuff?

DG: I looked it up.

PC: You’re anal.

DG: Leave my anus out of this. Anyway, you were successful as an actor in Canada, what brought you to the United States?

PC: I had done a lot of shows in Canada with George Schlatter and Carolyn Raskin who produced

Laugh In, and I got a call from them one day offering me a job on a two-hour special they were working on to replace Laugh In called It’s a Wacky World. It was Laugh In’s last year and this was going to be the follow up. So I sold my place in Toronto and moved my family out to Hollywood.

DG: Just like that?

PC: Just like that. Ego is such a propellant, you know? You’re gonna be on a show to replace Laugh In. And you’re gonna *star* in it. All of a sudden you’re bigger in your own mind than your mind is capable of understanding. And you’re not capable of failure. It’s not an option. Then the two-hour special just implodes. Poof. And there’s no participation trophy. There’s no little rooms for crying. Now you’re on your own. The bank wants your money. The grocery store wants your money. So what do you do?

DG: So what did you do?

PC: I wasn't worried at all.

DG: You weren't?

PC: My wife was.

DG: (Laughing) So you didn't lose any sleep over it.

PC: Naw, I figured something's gonna turn up. Don't worry about it. We'll get another TV show. Well, that same week they needed an announcer for the Sonny and Cher Show and it just so happened that my manager at the time had an in with them. So it was, "Peter, we need you to come down to CBS tonight." I figured, well I just bombed with NBC, let's try CBS. So I go down to CBS and they put me in a booth and they show me this piece of film and they say, "Peter, you're gonna say, 'From Television City in Hollywood,' then you're gonna hear some drums, then this ball is gonna open up and it's gonna make a squeaky sound, then in a funny cartoon voice, just come up with a funny voice, you're gonna say, 'It's the Sonny and Cher Show,' then the ball is gonna close up, then a sixteen count, then you're gonna hear a kettle drum, and then you're gonna say, 'Ladies and gentlemen, Sonny and Cher.'"

**If you'd like to hear Peter doing the Sonny and Cher intro, go to:*

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=zHSGUqnd0bU>

DG: Easy.

PC: Piece a cake.

DG: Did you hit it?

PC: One take. I mean, I'm from Canada. You had to be able to do everything.

DG: So that job led to you becoming part of the ensemble. But fairly quickly you went from doing on-camera work to voiceover almost exclusively. Was this a conscious decision or just the luck of the draw?

PC: After the Sonny and Cher Show ended I had done a couple of things and I was freelancing as an actor looking for jobs, westerns, or television of any

kind, when a voiceover agent at William Morris got ahold of me and he hit me with a decision. He said, "I'd love to represent you, and I'll give you 100% of *my* time if you give me 100% of *your* time for just **voiceover**. But I won't represent you if you're gonna go off to do a movie for three months at a time." So I thought about it and I thought, okay, why not? So I called him back and I **said**, "Okay, I'll give you 100%."

DG: And that was the beginning.

PC: That was the beginning. Now, at that time, early 70s, I thought, voiceover? What am I gonna do? I don't have anything. I gotta get a (demo) tape. Remember those?

DG: Sure. Reel-to-reel tapes back then.

PC: (laughing) That's right, reel-to-reel. Anyway, I had to fabricate a tape, so said to myself, how do I get this voice across? Now at that time United Airlines was doing commercials with their employees talking for the airline. So I did a thing like I was a pilot and I said something to the effect of, "Hi. I'm Jerry Long and I'm a pilot for United Airlines. You know, United is not only the greatest airline in the world, I think it's the only way to fly. Fly United." Well, it caused some stir, and soon after that I ended up doing Korean Airlines. (laughing) A far cry from United.

DG: Was Korean Airlines your first VO job in the States?

PC: No, my first job was Betty Crocker Snackin' Cakes.

DG: (Through gales of laughter, trying to imagine the voice of Optimus Prime hawking instant cake mix) You were the announcer?

PC: (In a high-pitched singsong non-Optimus voice) "Betty Crocker Snackin' Cakes..." It ran for over a year and I made more money on that one spot than I did on the whole run of the Sonny and Cher show. And I thought, holy moly...

DG: Easy money.

PC: Good candy.

DG: And thus began your career in voiceover. So putting aside commercial work, what was your first animated series?

PC: It was called Mighty Man & Yukk. And you and I have something in common in that regard.

DG: Oh? What's that?

PC: Both of our first jobs in animation were with Frank Welker.

DG: Well, that wouldn't be hard. Even back then Frank was all over the place.

PC: It was perhaps the greatest thing to ever happen to me, and I think you've said the same thing.

DG: Yep. Standing at the mic next to Frank Welker was like taking a master class in the art of voiceover.

PC: Exactly. Because you had the opportunity to get a kick start from the king. He's the king. That's what I call him, The King. He's surpassed Mel Blanc in my eyes. But he's also one of the most self-effacing, humble generous, giving people anyone could ever meet. One of the nicest guys in show business.

DG: One of the sweetest guys I ever worked with. Next to you, of course.

PC: See, that's why I like you.

DG: (Laughing) Anyway, regarding work at the mic, do you take a different approach to doing Optimus in the movies as opposed to the animated series?

PC: My voice hasn't changed, but my delivery has changed somewhat.

DG: How?

PC: In Generation One as an animated cartoon it was a lot more energetic, a lot more action. But as it progressed into the movies it became more dramatic and it had to become more human in order to relate with human beings. You have to relate to a human more conversationally. I kept the same

sense, but with an understanding that the character is forty-five feet tall and a human is six feet tall. And also, being big, his voice would be lower.

DG: So your pitch changed.

PC: In effect, yeah, but it's even technically assisted.

DG: They throw more bass in?

PC: They put it through a machine that gives it a more metallic and hollow sound.

DG: Well, that's nothing new. All our voices were processed in G1.

PC: Yeah, but this is different. They approximate his size. Give it a deeper end. But then in the last two they let my voice alone. It's just me.

DG: Michael Bay directs you in the movies, right?

PC: Right. It's just the two of us.

DG: How long are the recording sessions?

PC: I'll do two hours, which is about all I can take because I'm giving my low end.

DG: How is it working with him?

PC: I love him. He's great. To put together a feature film like the Transformers in a war zone, with all this imaginary stuff, and to employ actors to relate to these forty-five feet and seventy-five feet tall creatures, making sense of all that, it takes a general to do that. When I saw all the obstacles as a director he was presented with, and he overcame, well that's how smart he is, that's how brilliant he is, that's how attuned he is. And he's curt and he's short and he's insulting to a lot of people. But he's also very warm and encouraging. He knows exactly what to say and when to say it. And he doesn't take shit. I like guys like that.

DG: Well, he's made (the studio) a lot of money.

PC: Look, I'm not going to call somebody a genius because they've made money, but I'll tell you something, if you do a little research on Bay you'll find out he started in advertising. He directed the first Got Milk commercial. Brilliant stuff. Won all sorts of awards. And the reason I'm saying this is because when the first Transformers movie came out a lot of the fans wanted to know how it was going to be interpreted. Were the characters were going to remain the same or were they going to be an aberration? In other words, were their memories going to be trampled on. And I would respond naïvely, "I hope not." My first consideration was always for the fans.

DG: Without them we wouldn't be here.

PC: Exactly.

DG: You must get a lot of tokens of affection and gifts from fans. Anything special or especially meaningful?

PC: They all are, Dan, they all are. Because it comes from the heart. As small as it may be, it's important to me because it's important to them. Maybe a small little card with glitter and cut-outs and little things glued on and a little heart, "I love you." And you just want to cry. The sincerity is what kills you.

DG: Speaking of fans, many of them were upset over Optimus's demise in the 1986 Transformers animated movie. What are your thoughts on it?

PC: They could have been a little more up front with us.

DG: How so?

PC: Sunbow knew ahead of time what was happening. They could have told us. They could have said, we're going to get rid of you, Peter. It's nothing personal. But to do it (snaps fingers) like that. Here you've done a season, you're doing well, they put you in the movie, and suddenly you're gone.

DG: It bothered you.

PC: You're damn right it bothered me. People knew about it before I did and they didn't tell me.

DG: When did you find out? When you read the script?

PC: Yeah, when I read the script. I think it was Frank who said, "Page 19, you're getting axed." So I think, naw it's just a scene. but I look ahead and sure enough, no more Optimus, you're gone. They could have handled it better.

DG: There has been a lot of discussion over the years about how you created Optimus's voice. It's John Wayne, it's your brother Larry, and so on. So, for good and all, who or what is Optimus's based on?

PC: When the character was first written in the early shows there was a lot of that John Wayne sense of wording. Quick, short orders. But as many fans know, Optimus and my brother Larry, who was a Marine, are one and the same. They don't try to be tough. They don't force authority. They're understanding. And they're giving.

DG: You admired your brother a lot.

PC: He was my hero.¹ My brother Larry and I are thirteen months apart and I was six inches shorter. And we used to have to box. In a ring. In high school.

DG: Was this an exhibition type thing?

PC: No! You put on the gloves and you went head to head! This was in an arena with a ring in the middle. Canada. Montreal. Saint Leo's. There were two sides to the school, half Irish and half French Canadian, and they used to pit the English against the French.

DG: Did you ever fight Larry?

PC: Yeah! We were the Cullen brothers.

DG: How did that work?

PC: Larry could hit me and not hurt me, but every once in a while Larry would lean over and whisper to me, "Peter, if you do that again, I'm gonna really hurt ya." (Laughs) So I'd dance back a bit and pop him on the nose. With

¹ Larry Cullen died of a heart attack on March 11, 2011 at the age of 70.

these big gloves on, you know? But we knew what we were doing. We knew how to box. I'd throw a jab and his nose would start to bleed. 'Cause he was a bleeder. He bled. Now we'd be fighting and there'd be blood all over his face, and the mothers would be aghast...I mean, it was horrible! Can you imagine doing something like that today?

DG: No!

PC: Here we were these post-World War II kids, their parents had just come from back fighting on all fronts from the Atlantic to the Pacific, and you've got these little Irish kids out there fight after fight. Oh, God! You've got Irish kids going against French Canadian kids, the Cullens against the Carriers. And Larry's bleeding all over the place, and it's a big moment. And me, I would go for the crowd, I would just, I was playing to the crowd.

DG: Even then.

PC: Even then.

The Peter Cullen Interview is copyright ©2017 by Dan Gilvezan.