My Son, the Art Director

Illustration by R. O. Bleckman

My Dad, the Illustrator

Illustration by Nicholas Bleckman
There is a long-held tradition in certain quarters, dating back to biblical times, that sons (and, to a lesser extent, daughters) naturally follow in their father’s footsteps, apprenticing in and then continuing the family business. History offers in nearly equal measure successes (Bobby and Barry Bonds) and failures (King Laius and Oedipus). Over the past 15 years, The New York Times has boasted one perfect model of father-son synergy: R. O. Blechman (82), illustrator, cartoonist, and filmmaker, who has freelanced for the newspaper for more than four decades; and his son Nicholas Blechman (45), illustrator, cartoonist, and art director, who has worked at the Times since 1997. Not only did Blechman fils inherit much of Blechman père’s talent, but he is in the curious position of assigning work to his dad.

Yet the fate of this relationship was not etched in stone. There was no plan of succession devised upon Nicholas’s birth. R. O. (friends know him as Bob) did not force his will or his passion for art on Nicholas and his brother, Max (who did not become an artist).

“I tended to work late hours, away from home, and there never was any of my artwork in the apartment,” R. O. recalls. “So my not being around Nicholas might have given him the psychological space to become his own artist.” And in retrospect, R. O. thinks he probably wasn’t terribly encouraging. “It’s not the best field. There’s too much competition; too much backbiting and jealousy. But if you’re fated to be a cartoonist, illustrator, or designer, then you have to ignore the obstacles. In this respect, I think of what Bizet said about opera, What a marvelous art form. What a rotten field. But I suppose you could say this about any creative field.”

At first, Nicholas was oblivious to the fact that his dad was the R. O. Blechman, artist of the famed Alka-Seltzer talking stomach (which spurred me, as a kid, to try my own hand at cartooning). Then, in 1981, he came across one of his father’s New Yorker covers at the local supermarket. “It was Halloween, seen from the perspective of a pumpkin, and on prominent display at the checkout counter,” Nicholas says. “That’s when I knew he had a certain notoriety.” Occasionally, he’d also see familiar-looking drawings in the Times when the paper was delivered to their home. “I knew he was famous but could not understand why, since his drawings were so wiggly and minimal. At school, kids asked me what my father did, and I’d proudly reply ‘cartoonist.’ I’d be asked if I meant he did Scooby-Doo or Charlie Brown, and I’d invariably disappoint my buddies by saying, ‘He does New Yorker covers.’”

By Steven Heller
But as it turned out, Nicholas was more interested in the New Yorker sensibility than in mainstream comics and cartoons. Moreover, drawing was such a part of his genetic makeup that R. O. didn’t even have to encourage him to try his hand at art. As a youngster, Nicholas was always drawing, as a four-year-old he made a picture book about ships. “What impressed me was not that he drew a lot of ships,” R. O. says, “but that he made a book of them.” Later, Nicholas created comic strips and graphic narratives, at first just for himself. As a youngster, Nicholas was always drawing; as a four-year-old he made a picture book about ships. “What impressed me was not that he drew a lot of ships,” R. O. says, “but that he made a book of them.” Later, Nicholas created comic strips and graphic narratives, at first just for himself. His early drawings—the ones I saw as an art director at the Times, when Nicholas, in his early twenties and using the nom de plume Knickerbocker, showed me his portfolio—were funny and rather diminuitive, mirroring a bit of his dad’s love of detail. “Bob”—Nicholas calls his father by his first name—“taught me that every drawing needed wit, and that the quality of the idea was as important as its execution. He never sat me down and told me. It was just apparent in his critiques, in the drawings he did, and in the work of his peers, including Topor, Sempé, Tomi Ungerer, Ed Sorel, and Bob Gill, among others.”

It isn’t easy for a child to share a field with such an accomplished parent. Comparisons are inevitable, and the need to measure up can be paralyzing. But Nicholas insists, “I never would have entered the same field if he had not encouraged me. Which is not to say he wasn’t hypercritical. His brutal honesty hurt, but when he praised my work, I’d be walking on a cloud.” R. O. made certain to balance his critiques with encomiums: “I loved what he did, as I loved him. The two came together—still do.” And in turn, says Nicholas, “I never tried to live up to what he had done. My goal was simply to earn a living doing what I love to do.”

Nicholas loved comics and worshipped Art Spiegelman and Françoise Mouly’s RAW magazine, which R. O. would bring home whenever an issue came out. RAW was the impetus for Nicholas to launch his own publication, Nozone, a comics magazine with a satiric bite. “Bob became a contributor,” Nicholas says, “but not at the beginning. I needed the first eight issues to be entirely mine, probably because I needed to define myself against his fame.” That was when Nicholas began using the moniker Knickerbocker, to distinguish himself further. “But I have since dropped it,” he says, “because there is more integrity in my own name.”

Of course, the anxiety can go the other way, for slightly different reasons. Parents will do whatever it takes to help their children succeed, and R. O. was no exception. “I remember that when he went to college—Oberlin, the same one I attended—his art teacher didn’t like some of the work he did,” Bob says. “I thought the teacher was crazy, and I told Nicholas that. I hate to think what might have happened if he hadn’t shown me his college artwork.”

When I met Nicholas in the late 1980s, I had no idea that he and R. O. were related. R. O. (whom I had been commissioning for almost a decade) never asked me to see him. Most of R. O.’s fatherly assistance comes...
from occasional criticism. “That’s the prerogative a loving father can take,” R. O. says. “He may reject my advice—often does—but I think he knows that it’s done out of love and concern.”

Sometimes, the roles are reversed. R. O. is often art directed by Nicholas, who in 1997 became the art director of the Times’ Op-Ed page and is now in the same role for the newspaper’s Book Review. It is a delicate working relationship, as R. O. explains in a circuitous way. “I don’t often show my work to others, even my wife or son. That may make me sound like a very secure artist and person, but I’m neither. But I think my very insecurity—that trembling line, that identification with the underdog—makes my work mine.” A squabble has yet to arise, but Nicholas says it requires a certain fortitude to be both son and art director. Still, he relishes working together: “Because we are related, we are both more honest in our criticism of each other. He doesn’t hold back from telling me what he thinks, and I tend to overdirect him in return. I think this produces better results in the end.”

It is not unusual for children to inherit traits, physical and otherwise, from their parents. What about work? R. O. says that “obviously the look is very different. And Nicholas does more graphic work, more computer-oriented work, than I do. Although I prefer his hand-drawn artwork, and have told him that.” Nicholas more or less concurs: “He draws wiggly, I draw straight. He uses a pen, I use a mouse. I don’t think we should be compared. We are different people, with different styles. I think precisely because his style is so unique, I never compared myself to him. But we have similar handwriting, and I’m really good at forging his signature.”

Despite his need to remain distinctive, Nicholas continues to rely on his father’s advice: “I once asked Paul Rand to do an Op-Ed piece on the National Endowment of the Arts. His solution was to tear up the letters N.E.A. Unsure of this idea, I asked my dad what he thought. His advice was, ‘Just make sure Paul Rand signs it.’ The signature made all the difference. It called attention to the fact that this was not any designer doing a type substitution: ‘N.E.A.’ is the endowment of the arts.”

Now 82, R. O. no longer keeps a large studio, preferring to work from his farmhouse in upstate New York. He hasn’t retired—he says he’s racing the clock. After a slew of commercials and short films, he recently started on a storyboard for his first feature film (which will be both animated and live-action). At 45, Nicholas is speeding up. He has two children’s books coming out in 2013, is working on another issue of Nozone, and continues as the art director of the Book Review. With editorial illustration venues drying up, he sees an opportunity for illustrators to produce their own work, as authors and entrepreneurs. Beyond that, he says, “I’d also like to build a boat.” Asked how they felt about each other’s accomplishments, father and son answered in unison: “Damn proud.”