
The Original *Night at the Museum*: An Interview with Milan Trenc

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Milan Trenc, a filmmaker and illustrator in Zagreb, Croatia, wrote and illustrated *The Night at the Museum* in 1993. Little did he imagine it would be made into a feature-length Hollywood film in 2006, starring Ben Stiller, Robin Williams, Dick Van Dyke and Mickey Rooney. Was it a dream come true? While in the midst of working on a children's novel called *Psychic Kid Detectives*, and finishing two animated shorts, *Elephant Goes to Kindergarten* and *Loneliness*, Trenc paused long enough to discuss how a few of his pictures ended up on the silver screen.

Heller: Your book *The Night at the Museum* (published in 1993) is the basis for the movie *Night at the Museum* starring Ben Stiller, which has done very nicely at the box office. How did your illustrated tale come about in the first place?

Trenc: I was visiting the museum one afternoon, and when I came home, ideas just started coming. I thought, the exhibits look alive, so who says they are not? I have this "parallel worlds" thing that appears in all of my work. Usually it is about reality being an illusion; here, it is about the illusion being a reality. I started sketching and then just added a bit of a storyline.

The museum guards are a fascination to me, uniformed and all, and yet still so harmless and a bit goofy. And there is this concept of night guards doing nothing. I thought it would be fun to toy with the idea of a guard working his ass off and nobody appreciating it. And there is the titillation: what's going on behind the closed doors of the museum, all those skeletons and beasts inside? You must think there is a secret behind doors.

Heller: How did producer Chris Columbus find this book, and what was the process of making your story into a film?

Trenc: At the time, I organized readings and window displays in Barnes & Noble bookstores in New York. One of them was on Broadway on the Upper West Side, and if I'm not mistaken, that's where Chris Columbus was living. He bought the book and read it to his children, and thought, "Hey, this could make a good movie!"

Heller: Your book is wonderful for children. As you were drawing the pictures, did you ever think that it might also work in a live-action format?

Trenc: I was educated as a film director and made comics, movies and illustrations. I did comic strips for Heavy Metal; the next year an animated film, *The Big Time*, shown at the London Film Festival; then illustrations for the New York Times Book Review, covers for Time, Business Week and The Nation. I directed a feature film, *Zen Stories*. I tried all media. *The Night at the Museum* was the first children's book I ever wrote or illustrated.

That said, it still never occurred to me that it could be a film! When I heard 20th Century Fox was interested in the rights, I was at a loss. How in the world do they think they can make a feature movie out of this? And I was skeptical all the way to the end. It was a very difficult task, and I am very pleased with what an excellent, entertaining movie it turned out to be. It was a magic moment that all these talented people came together: the screenwriters, Ben Garant and Thomas Lennon; Shawn Levy, the director; the great production designer Claude Paré; and Ben Stiller, who gave a great performance and life to the main character.

People often ask me, "So, what are you, really?" I think of myself as a story maker. Whatever I do has scenes, characters. I think that's why this book was suitable.

Heller: The American Museum of Natural History is a wondrous place. I remember those dioramas so well from my childhood. As a native of Yugoslavia, did you have anything like it back when you were a child?

Trenc: We do have a museum of natural history in Zagreb, and I did go there when I was a kid. But it's an old-fashioned, European-style museum and not even remotely as huge as the one in New York. It has lots of bones and some dusty, stuffed animals. As a kid I was most fascinated with the whale that used to be there. It was 20 feet long, at most.

Heller: How faithful is the movie to your original concept?

Trenc: They turned a few pages of text into a full screenplay but still managed to remain faithful to the spirit of the book. Maybe it's just my fancy, but I feel that the things that were so basic in my book were enhanced but still remained true: the goofiness and good-natured eagerness of Larry (the night guard, played by Ben Stiller), his working without being appreciated, other guards ganging up on him and the whole concept of this enclosed world. I also like that the movie has good cheer and that it is very non-aggressive, very benevolent. There is no real evil or violence. It's a cushy (if unreal) world, like classics of the '50s and '60s. It is heartwarming that such a movie can be successful with such a big audience. Without sex and violence, just on imagination and laughs? That's the movie I would have tried to make—and probably wouldn't be as successful.

Heller: Did you feel that the style or look of your work was compromised in any way?

Trenc: Just look at the movie poster. It is so much more elaborate, so much more sophisticated than the cover of my book. And still, the arch is in the same place, as is the dinosaur's head, too. The lion is peeking out the same, and Stiller is there in the middle with a flashlight. Even the curve of the octopus' tentacle is there, only they replaced it with a skeletal tail.

Heller: Well, it's yours then...

Trenc: I am flattered they used my composition as I had spent many days rearranging the cover until it was just right. It's easy to look at the book and say, "Ah, it's not artistic, it's just a few doodles," if you are not aware how much work of compositing, lighting and stuff went into this "done in five minutes" style. When the book came out, it was never reviewed. I had never drawn anything else in this style. It was created for this book; it was a concept. And it worked insofar as kids love the book. But it doesn't have that highbrow beauty that is expected of an artistic picture book. One doesn't expect there would be something conceptual behind such a silly book. Something in its simplicity insults people that write reviews, I guess. The only review I ever got was something like: "This confused and contrived story is accompanied with suitable illustrations." It was on Amazon for years. When did you ever hear that a picture book would get such a vitriolic bad review?

Heller: How much direct involvement did you have with the making of the film?

Trenc: I tried to write some kind of a treatment for it at the very beginning, but the studio was skeptical of my skills as a screenwriter. I guess being Croatian (as in "not-a-native-English-speaker")... and on top of it, they don't like writers to get involved. I think they were afraid I'd be too protective of the material. I'm sure I would have had a hard time moving away from my material. And I don't think it would be such a successful movie. Shawn Levy, the director, called me as a courtesy during post-production. But it was very nice when many people that worked on the movie, from the stars to the production designer, mentioned that they had my book close by and found inspiration in it. And it was very nice of Shawn to introduce me at the screening. Things like that make your heart fly.

Heller: As the backseat driver, isn't it odd to see your conception transformed in a way where you have no control over its outcome? How did you feel about relinquishing your creative control?

Trenc: Being a film director I think I am actually more benevolent than a pure writer would be. I know what a hellish job it is to make a movie. I made a little story and a few illustrations, and then a bunch of great people took it and turned it into a \$100 million movie. I think I like it that way. It's awfully sweet of them, right? "Look what we did out of your book!" And there was no movie in my book, just a few little inspirational points. I think it's a great example of how the same thing can work great in two mediums, and who would be silly to complain? Not me. I wish I could be more critical but I really loved the movie, and I don't like many movies. There were a few dramaturgically weak points in the script, but that goes by fast.

Heller: Do you still feel that *The Night at the Museum* is your baby?

Trenc: No. When I came to the Museum of Natural History on the night of the premiere, and the facade was adorned with 20-foot banners that read “Night at the Museum,” and when TV crews were lining the red carpet, I felt out of it. But I also felt poetic justice. When the book came out there was a meeting at the museum, and the book was banned from the museum store. The reasons were that it portrays animals as alive and shows the guards sleeping. So, I must admit I had a bit of gleefulness looking at the banners. But then again, it was not my book that won: it was big Hollywood bucks.

Heller: That’s fascinating. Your being banned is like a kind of Eastern European censorship. On another note, would you have cast Robin Williams and Ben Stiller? I’m sure that you, like anyone who has ever created narrative art, have a star wish list of who would play them, their family, their friends, etc. Who is on your wish list?

Trenc: It’s interesting, when Fox first started the project there was talk of Robin Williams as the main guy. But I am very glad he’s still in the movie—he has a great presence, and he’s very popular. A great, great actor. I had no idea whom I’d cast as principal, really. Now that I saw the film I’m grateful it’s Ben Stiller. He believed in his character. That gave credibility to the film. As I mentioned to him, I guess the movie was waiting 13 years for him to mature. And I was very pleased when I found out that the legendary Mickey Rooney and, my favorite, Dick Van Dyke is in, also Bill Cobbs. You see I am a great fan of Disney’s classic movies like *Mary Poppins*. I am happy there is a link through Dick Van Dyke—and those old gentlemen know how to act. It’s great how much energy they still have!

Heller: Out of curiosity, and I’m not going to ask what you earned on the film rights, but has the film impacted sales of the book?

Trenc: Not really. It is selling the same as before.

About the Author. Steven Heller, co-chair of MFA “Designer As Author” at School of Visual Arts, is the author of *Merz to Emigre and Beyond: Avant Garde Magazine Design of the Twentieth Century* (Phaidon Press), *The Education of a Comics Artist* co-edited with Michael Dooley (Allworth Press), *The Education of a Graphic Designer, Second Edition* and *The Education of an Art Director* (with Veronique Vienne) (Allworth Press).