



Bridge BUILDER

JINKO GOTOH IS A PROBLEM-SOLVER WHOSE
CREATIVE VISION, DETERMINATION AND
OPTIMISM HAS HELPED BRING THE WORLD SOME
OF THE BEST ANIMATED FILMS EVER MADE.

WRITTEN BY KERI LEE

PHOTOGRAPHED BY PHILLIP GRAYBILL

Some people discover their life's passion in a middle school math class. Most find it later in life—after high school, at college or a pivotal job, or maybe even in a Grandma Moses moment in their twilight years. For Jinko Gotoh, the discovery arrived early, at age 7, courtesy of Disney and two talking dogs.

Watching *Lady and the Tramp*, dubbed in Japanese, in Tokyo's iconic Hibiya Theater, vastly expanded Gotoh's already vivid imagination. Visiting *Astro Boy* creator Osamu Tezuka's studio soon after and seeing his paintings and layouts codified her dream: One day, she too would make animated movies.

That dream lurked quietly through her rocky immigration to America, her parents' insistence on practicality (she earned a BS in applied math before her MFA in film), and her launching a successful company producing commercials back in Japan. Then, one night after filming a Sanyo ad with Bon Jovi on a New York City rooftop, Gotoh went to see *Who Framed Roger Rabbit?*, and that early dream roared back to life.

"Coming out the door of the theater, I was like, 'Oh my god, *this* is going on! Why am I sitting here making commercials?'" Gotoh immediately began orchestrating a pivot into animated films.

Two years later, aided by her technology background and connections from commercial production, Gotoh was hired as CGI producer on the Warner Bros. live-action/animated comedy feature *Space Jam*. Her next stop was director of digital production at Walt Disney Animation Studios.

A string of successful projects with increasing producing responsibilities followed, culminating in Gotoh earning the Producers Mark for two 2019 films: Sergio Pablos' BAFTA-winning/Academy Award-nominated film *Klaus* and *The Lego Movie 2: The Second Part*.

For Pablos, Gotoh's gift as a producer is her ability to protect the film while also masterfully guiding the numerous teams and stakeholders involved in animated production.

"An animated film is an incredibly complex endeavor with many moving parts, and I've seen many get lost and overwhelmed by it all. Jinko has this uncanny ability to diagnose at a glance, and to design a plan of action that's custom-made for each of the many challenges one encounters during a production," says Pablos.

Klaus was particularly challenging, being Pablos' first film as a director and the studio's first full film.

"But Jinko would plow through every time, leading the team with a firm and fair hand," Pablos says. "I am certain we would not have succeeded if not for her guidance."

Currently, Gotoh is applying her skills as a producer on Sony Pictures Animation's *Spider-Man: Beyond the Spider-Verse*. Getting from that darkened Tokyo theater to the final installment in the wildly successful *Spider-Verse* trilogy required the grit, intelligence and determined optimism that she has become known for along the way.

Gotoh with Justin Thompson and Alice Brooks at a screening of *Spider-Man: Across the Spider-Verse*, presented to Altadena, California, eighth graders impacted by the Eaton Fire.



It also required an ability to build bridges between disparate cultures—including tech people and creatives, production teams and directors, and creatives and financiers. Gotoh first discovered her talent for this at an early age.

THE ART OF THE BRIDGE BUILD

When 8-year-old Gotoh and her family boarded a flight from Tokyo to a new life in the United States, she was thrilled, her mood lit by the vision of her soon-to-be new home that she'd fallen in love with watching *Lady and the Tramp* on the big screen.

"In the film, America just looked like

such a magical, colorful place. And for me, moving here wasn't scary at all—it all felt like magic," Gotoh recalls. "Then of course, when I got here, it wasn't like that at all."

Once her family moved into their Pasadena home, the vibrant, beautiful world Gotoh had imagined gave way to an all-too-real one of racial epithets scrawled across their white garage door, and rotten tomatoes splattered on the panels of her mother's new AMC Rambler. She explores these experiences in her published poetry, including in "Sagashite Iru Kodomo (Child Who Seeks)." That neither she nor her younger sister spoke English further complicated their arrival in America,



yet Gotoh was determined to somehow make it all work.

"For my mother, coming here was really, really hard," Gotoh recalls. "All she wanted to do was go back. But for us, it wasn't about going back. For us, it was like, 'How do we make our life here? How do we make it be great here?' I realized I was being judged for what I looked like, but I wasn't going to let it stop me. I still wanted to excel. I still wanted to pursue my dreams."

Finding a way to thrive in this strange new world became a sort of boot camp for Gotoh's career to come. She found that if she organized things—clubs, events, projects—she could feel like she was part of something in a social world initially bent on excluding her. Gradually, she learned to build bridges between cultures, to honor her Japanese heritage while also listening to and understanding the stories of others. This bridging ability would come in handy.

BRIDGING ART AND TECHNOLOGY

In the 1990s, animation was transitioning from the optical effects that powered *Roger Rabbit* into the digital era. On *Space Jam*, Gotoh's first industry job, new digital tools gave the artists—many of whom were part of the *Roger Rabbit* team—more control because they could immediately see



what they were compositing. But the big leap in animation technology was still unfolding.

Gotoh was director of digital production at Disney when the CGI era began in earnest on *Dinosaur*, which she characterizes as "a huge endeavor" that involved almost a one-to-one ratio of artists to technologists. The latter built the technology so that artists could build the film.

"I got there at a very exciting time. We had to figure out everything—how to create skin, how to create muscles, all of it. Even how to animate," says Gotoh, adding that, at the time, no one outside Pixar knew how to animate in CGI. "So we built the tools."

With her grasp of both worlds—art and technology—Gotoh was able to mediate the constant communications required between animators and technologists as they figured out everything from how to create fur and skin to how four-legged dinosaurs versus two-legged lemurs actually moved.

Tamara Boutcher was production manager on *Dinosaur* and has known Gotoh for more than 30 years. Throughout that time, she says, Gotoh has always focused on storytelling and



From left: Gotoh with Women in Animation secretary Julie Ann Crommett at the 2024 Annecy International Animation Festival; with *Klaus* teammates Sergio Pablos and Marisa Roman at the 2020 Oscars Nominees Luncheon; Gotoh announcing Women in Animation's '50-50 by 2025' gender parity initiative at the 2015 VIEW Conference.

how to engage audiences visually to bring them into a movie's world.

"She assembles talented teams to create compelling worlds using any method necessary, never deterred by challenges in style or technology," says Boutcher. "She is undaunted when others say that a style is not feasible for a feature-length film. She will figure it out to get the story up on the screen. Her unwavering determination and creativity define her work."

Gotoh sees parallels between the early days of CGI and the disruptions AI is bringing to the industry now. She also sees a lot of fear—understandable, real-world fear about job losses, IP and many other issues. At the same time, she worries that if people are too focused on what they fear, the industry will lose opportunities to influence the development and use of AI.

"People ask me about AI all the time, and I say, 'It's just a tool, and we can't be afraid of this tool. If we want to influence how AI is going to change our industry, we have to embrace it and

work with the technologists to achieve what we want it to do,” says Gotoh. “I don’t want AI to take over artists’ jobs. I want artists to be able to use AI as a tool to create things that we haven’t been able to visualize before.”

With generative AI, Gotoh believes protecting artists’ rights is essential. But the industry has yet to create relevant business models, and there is not adequate legislation to ensure that protection, whether for existing rights like IP and copyright or for emerging ones like protecting artists’ voices and likenesses—all of which Gotoh says is clearly and urgently needed.

At the same time, Gotoh recognizes that AI is not going anywhere but forward. She is interested in its abilities to transform the ways artists can create and tell visual stories. She is always asking questions to further this interest: “How does AI work to create that next shift, like when animation went from 2D to CG? What’s the next thing? I don’t think anyone knows, but I’m excited to think about the kind of visual innovations machine learning will make possible.”

THE PATH TO PRODUCER

Gotoh left Disney for Pixar, where she was an associate producer on *Finding Nemo*. After that, she left Pixar to do what she’d always wanted—work on innovative animated movies that took risks, including Shane Acker’s *9* and the French film *The Illusionist*, directed and cowritten by Sylvain Chomet.

It was a period in which Gotoh applied her accumulated experiences to create environments in which teams could excel. It also sharpened her abilities to address the inevitable problems that arise in animation’s long-haul production process and to get across the line films worthy of the effort. Underlying Gotoh’s problem-solving approach is her determination and her optimism.

“If something isn’t working, there’s a good reason, but there’s really nothing you can’t solve. Usually it’s just figuring

out how to get people to work together,” says Gotoh.

“Often artists are used to working in certain ways and might struggle or be challenged by a new director’s particular style. My job is to talk with them, to listen to the issue, and also to get them to understand we’re all here to support the filmmaker’s vision. And our job is to figure out how to do that. That’s the human element of it all. Without that human element working, you can’t make great art.”

Gotoh loves working with people, building a team and creating an environment that lets artists do their best work. Often, she is brought in on films where production is in progress and the teams are already assembled, yet the true work of team building has yet to begin. For her, the first priority is to find out what’s happening on teams, to talk with supervisors and the artists, and to assess what’s working and what’s standing in the way of people doing their best work.

“Animation is such a collaborative process, often with hundreds and hundreds of people working on a production. And now, so much of our animation industry is being outsourced,” says Gotoh. “But I keep saying to everyone: Don’t worry about that. Don’t worry about who gives you the paycheck. We’re all one team. We’re all doing this together. That’s what I love: figuring out how to get people to work together and make great animation. That’s how we get great films.”

‘LIKE A JEDI MASTER’

When Gotoh is called in on films already in production, she looks for something in the story that matters to the world, whether it’s in the theme or in a character. Doing so helps keep her focused on the film’s ultimate importance as the months and often years go on.

Finding that hook to fuel her work was easy on *The Little Prince*, a 2015 French animated feature directed by Mark Osborne. In it, a young,



"You just have to keep going. You have to go follow your passion, go follow your heart. Passion is what keeps us alive. Passion expands us beyond fear, so we don't even think about being afraid."

— JINKO GOTOH

overscheduled girl recaptures her childhood spirit after meeting the Old Aviator (voiced by Jeff Bridges), who introduces her to his adventures in the classic Antoine de Saint-Exupéry story.

When production hit a rough patch, Osborne pushed to bring Gotoh onto the project for her expertise across production as well as her appreciation for the creative aspects, which was a voice he very much wanted in the room.

"I've never felt more fully supported in the midst of the chaos of production than I felt working with Jinko. She had a very careful and sensible approach to any problems that arose, any stresses that occurred, or any disasters that befell production—and there were many," says Osborne, who characterized her multifaceted approach to problem-solving as being "like a Jedi master, and almost clairvoyant at times."

"Whenever we had issues, especially technical ones, she could rally all the forces necessary within the production to see a way through," Osborne adds. "And when creative issues caused obstacles, she never shut down the creative aspect of the process. She always found a way to support it."

Osborne says Gotoh's ability to

achieve the "always treacherous balance" between creative vision and production demands was what impressed him most. He believes this ability is the only reason that *The Little Prince* was able to be completed in the way that it was.

"It's a movie full of creative expressionism and beautiful flaws. Those kinds of details can be choked out of the finished film through the rigorous production process that exists in animation," Osborne says. "Jinko is aware of how important those bits of magic are, and she finds every way possible to make sure that the whole crew never forgets about how delicate and important the balance is."

KLAUS AND LEGO 2

Being an independent producer during a time when most animation producers were studio-based let Gotoh take on projects that fed her love for new challenges and her passion for innovation, in both storytelling and visuals. One such project was *Klaus*, the thematically rich Santa Claus origin story. When Pablos first approached her about it, she loved the story but was dubious about its prospects.



PHOTO COURTESY OF NETFLIX



Gotoh-produced *Klaus* won seven Annies, a BAFTA and an Academy Award nomination for Best Animated Feature.

"I told him, 'It's a lovely story, but maybe you should write a children's book, so you'll have some IP,'" Gotoh says. "But then he went away and got funding to make this incredible teaser."

When the two met up soon after, Pablos showed Gotoh his teaser. Gotoh immediately got it.

"I said, 'Sergio, we're gonna make this movie,'" Gotoh recalls.

While *Klaus* went on to industry acclaim—including winning seven Annie Awards and a BAFTA for Best Animated Feature, and being nominated for an Academy Award in the same category—getting there was fraught with challenges. For starters, it was an original Christmas story, and they struggled to find funding.

Also, Pablos was intent on using 2D in an era when it was viewed as flat and a thing of the past. When they began pitching the project, Gotoh told him not to mention the 2D aspect at first and to wait for someone to

comment—as they inevitably did—on how they achieved such an interesting look with CGI. Then Pablos could explain it all—after it had proven its value. It's an example of a small but essential tactic that Gotoh brought to *Klaus*. She would bring many others that contributed to its success.

Before that success could unfold, however, another unexpected challenge arrived. They were a year into pitching and looking for funding for *Klaus* when Gotoh got a call from Warner Bros., offering her *Lego 2*. After discussing the project and meeting Dan Lin, Gotoh was eager to work on the sequel. So, after assuring Pablos that she would do everything possible to continue supporting *Klaus*, she took the job.

"*Lego 2* was a huge movie and there was a lot of pressure," says Gotoh. "But I was excited to work on a franchise. It was like, if I'm going to work on a franchise, there isn't a better one to work on. I couldn't have been more thrilled."

Lin says that he and executive producers Phil Lord and Chris Miller wanted Jinko on the film as a fellow producer so that she could help them guide the film's creative aspects as well as oversee the day-to-day operations.

"It's rare to find a producer who has skills in both creative storytelling and physical production, and Jinko is strong in both areas," says Lin. "She's tough when she needs to be, but also nurtures filmmakers when that is required."

Lin says he was equally thrilled with her approach to problem-solving, which entailed getting everyone on the big, high-stakes project in a room to talk out pivotal issues.

"On *Lego 2*, there were many voices—the producers, the director, the studio, the animation vendor and the Lego company. Naturally, we didn't agree on everything," says Lin, adding that when the inevitable stumbling blocks arose, Gotoh was always the one to call the leaders together to hash them out.

"She is someone who doesn't have to be the loudest voice in the room, but she knows how to get things done in an effective way. She is a producer I rely on to get movies made and finished."

While on *Lego 2*, Gotoh continued working with Pablos and the team in Madrid on morning calls several times a week. After *Lego 2* production wrapped, she headed back to Spain, where she found the *Klaus* team in crisis.

"There was a particularly tricky moment during production when we were trying to figure out how to organize the cleanup department in order to deliver in time," Pablos recalls. "Some members of the team were convinced that it could not be done. Others thought the current plan was just fine. It was chaos. Jinko calmly looked over the charts and production reports, heard everyone out, and laid out her plan."

That plan included outsourcing some of the cleanup work to get the help they desperately needed to deliver the project to Netflix on time and on budget. Gotoh led that effort under what Pablo says was incredible stress and production pressure, accomplishing what they all thought was impossible.

When asked about her experience in returning to Madrid and *Klaus*, Gotoh characterizes the chaotic situation as simply a problem to be solved. "It was a lot of fun," she says, without a trace of sarcasm.

The results of those final-hour efforts is a holiday movie that ranks among many a critic's top 10.

Although released in 2019, the movie's setting—the far north fictionalized European city of Smeerensburg—seems uncannily like the dark side of America today, with people divided, warring, and not wholly articulate on the whys of it all.

"To me, what's so magical about that story is that you start in this dark place and then, because of this relationship between these two characters, you've transformed the whole world," says



Gotoh with *The Little Prince* production designer Alex Juhasz, director Mark Osborne, and actor Riley Osborne in 2014.

Gotoh. "That's what is beautiful about that story. The world really needs that."

OPENING ACCESS AND OPPORTUNITIES

Gotoh's keen interest in contributing to the world extends beyond her producing work on films to her passionate advocacy for women and underrepresented groups and genders in her work as vice president of Women in Animation (WIA), a member of the board of governors for the Academy of Motion Picture Arts and Sciences, and as a PGA board member.

WIA supports and advocates for women and underrepresented genders in animation, VFX, and gaming. Marge Dean, Skybound Entertainment's head of animation and WIA president, said the organization was initially struggling to get funding when Jinko stepped in and set a goal of raising enough money to bring on a full-time staff.

The money was raised within six months, says Dean, which transformed the trajectory of WIA.

"Jinko's approach to everything she does is complete commitment," says Dean. "Once she makes a decision that something needs to happen or

change, there's no stopping her until it's done. She is dogged and determined to accomplish the target. I don't know anyone who's more strategic and resourceful than Jinko."

Gotoh, Dean and the entire WIA team have impacted many lives in animation worldwide. After the COVID shutdown shuttered WIA's in-person mentoring groups, they launched an online mentoring platform. Because mentees had to apply to work with particular mentors, who in turn had to accept them into their mentoring circle, the implied contract solidified commitment on both sides.

As a result, the platform has been hugely successful, and more than 3,500 women and underrepresented genders from across the world have participated.

Gotoh says she loves being a mentor, and currently mentors people through several different organizations. But it was only through her early work with WIA that she realized how important it is—and how lucky she is to have achieved success without the benefit of such support.

"I've been very fortunate, because if I had had to rely on role models, I wouldn't be where I am today," Gotoh

says. "That's why I have to help the next generation by making sure that they have role models to help them pursue their dreams. Without that, it can really be just such a struggle."

Dean says that from the start, she was impressed not only by Gotoh's unmovable commitment to justice and fairness, but also by her deep love for art and artists. Yet it wasn't until she arranged to meet Gotoh at an animation event dinner that she understood the magnitude of her colleague's impact.

Dean arrived early and found the room filled with animation dignitaries—primarily men—whom she recognized but didn't know personally.

"When Jinko walked into the restaurant, everyone reacted. Their rugged and reserved faces softened and warmed at her entrance. They all were eager to give her a hug," Dean recalls. "I realized at that point that my colleague was one of the most beloved people in animation. Clearly, she had touched everyone in the room and made their lives better for it."

In addition to her work with WIA, Gotoh is one of two elected governors, along with Marlon West, representing the Animation Branch on the Academy's Board of Governors. Producer Bonnie Arnold, who previously served as an Academy governor, echoes Dean's assessment of the impact Gotoh has had in her field and her advocacy work.

"Jinko has such a long history in the animation field and just has huge fans. So many people know her, love her and certainly respect her," says Arnold, adding that being on the Academy Board of Governors requires dealing with many different branches and people.

"One of the big challenges is just knowing when to listen and when to speak up. And Jinko very quickly found her footing in that. Having the variety of experiences she has in production really helps," Arnold says. "She's worked in so many areas, from studio to independent features to her work with CGI. She's just been such an asset."



Gotoh lost her home in the 2025 Eaton Fire, but was able to recover the metal box containing her parents' ashes thanks to assistance from a rescue dog team from Northern California.

ANIMATION BEYOND BORDERS

Gotoh's passion for animation is rooted in the process of creation as well as the potential she sees in the future of the field. Being active in animation internationally—both through her work on films and in advocacy organizations—she is quick to highlight the fact that animation is a medium. While it is seen and celebrated mainly in four-quadrant family films in the United States, its diversity is far greater across the world.

"The medium itself is so expressive, whether you're doing experimental films or adult animation or fantasy or science fiction or horror—whatever," Gotoh says. "There are so many different stories to tell, and people are using this medium to tell all kinds of stories."

Gotoh cites the 2017 drama *The Breadwinner*, the searing documentary *Flee*, and 2024's Oscar-winning adventure *Flow* as just a few examples of what's possible in animation. And with the increasing availability of cloud storage and open-source technologies such as Blender, overhead and costs of animation are dropping dramatically, making it more accessible to more creators.

Gotoh points out that animation is a perfect medium for films like Jonas Poher Rasmussen's *Flee*, which tells the story of Rasmussen's high school friend and his heart-wrenching escape from war-torn Afghanistan.

"It is a compelling story that's important to be told. And it could never have been told if it wasn't animated," says Gotoh, citing the sensitive nature of the film and the need for the man's anonymity.

The combination of animation's increasing accessibility and Gotoh's confidence in American and international audiences' hunger and openness for new stories, particularly from diverse filmmakers, is just one of the reasons she is so optimistic about the future of the film industry.

FIRES AND THE FUTURE

Few people would regard 2025 as a

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— DAN LIN

stellar year on planet Earth. But for film industry people still searching for their bearings after the pandemic and the production shutdowns, restarts and strikes, January 2025 was an unfathomably cruel start to the year for everyone.

Most certainly including Gotoh.

Aiming for an overnight escape from the Eaton Fire's smoke and ash, she took her dogs and her toothbrush to stay with a friend. The following morning, a neighbor sent a text with a video showing Gotoh's house on fire. It, along with almost every other house on their close-knit cul de sac, had burned to the

ground. All Gotoh salvaged from the site were her grandmother's ring and, thanks to a small team of rescue dogs from Northern California, a metal box containing the ashes of her parents.

Gotoh—still mourning the loss of her beloved partner, the writer Bernie Hafeli, less than a year before—shifted into problem-solving mode.

"Everyone grieves and suffers in different ways. I was like, OK, I have to find a home for my dogs. And make sure all my neighbors were OK because we had a lot of elderly on our street," says Gotoh. "I was so busy trying to make sure everything, everyone, was OK. It was a good six months in when I realized I wasn't OK."

It was a feeling she sat with and let sink in. Eventually she did what Gotoh does—not out of naivete or forced positivity—but because like that producer who sees a problem blocking a film's path or that shy immigrant girl staring at a world that wasn't at all what she expected, Gotoh simply had to figure out how to move forward and make it better. And to know that she could.

"When I was 8 years old, I was passionate about so many things that motivated me, and they kept me going, regardless of all the stuff that was happening around me," she says. "You just have to keep going. You have to go follow your passion, go follow your heart. Passion is what keeps us alive. And passion expands us beyond fear, so we don't even think about being afraid."

Today, a big part of what keeps driving Gotoh forward is her intense gratitude and passion for this industry and the people who make it work and who make stories that matter.

"We only get to do this once. Just because things are in a horrible state in some ways doesn't mean that there aren't opportunities. There are. We have to keep seeking out those opportunities and keep creating, and keep highlighting those artists and creators who inspire our audiences so that they will keep going too." ■