LIFE

UConn alum shares insights on puppetry and film at The Ballard

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The Ballard Institute and Museum of Puppetry invited students, staff and community members alike to get a unique insight into the making of Laika Studios' newest and longest feature film to date, "Wildwood," on Wednesday evening.

University of Connecticut alum Maggie Flanagan returned to Storrs for the first time since completing their MFA in puppetry arts in 2020 to shed light on their experience working as a puppet maintenance generalist on the set of "Wildwood."

Laika's most ambitious stop-motion film to date, "Wildwood" took 16 years to make, nine of which were years in active production. The effort included 236 puppets, 2804 shots, 140,000 faces and 1000 employees, figures summarized by Flanagan in her presentation which drew visible gasps from the audience.

Among the crowd were a multitude of people, from puppetry students to professors to puppet enthusiasts or people who simply wanted to do something different with their Wednesday evening.

Ellie Campbell, a fifth-semester psychology student, explained that she never thought much about stop motion, but after watching "Wildwood" on Monday, her curiosity was sparked.

Campbell "thought it would be really interesting to learn more about the work that goes into it."

The turnout was so impressive that some attendees had to stand, and chairs were hastily rearranged to accommodate the ever-growing audience.

Flanagan outlined the very long road that led them to Laika; their journey was certainly not linear and there were two things they emphasized for those looking to get into similar roles: persistence and connections. Starting off with an undergraduate degree in music, followed by a postgrad education in puppetry, various artistic side hustles, internship stints, seven applications to Laika and a pivot in their skillset, they finally landed a competitive position at the studio.

Dedication and persistence were key. As was maintaining professional contacts, something Flanagan emphasised was essential to get them a foot in the door at Laika. Flanagan encouraged current students to network and stay in contact with classmates and the UConn alumni pool.

Flanagan provided in-depth insight into the day-to-day happenings at Laika during production, particularly at the "Puppet Hospital" where they worked. Described as a "big dark room" at the studio, this was the dedicated area for puppet maintenance and repair. Tasks here included cleaning fabric, stitching, swapping rigs and silicone work. As Flanagan put it, this is where they "kept those puppets working!"

The daily workflow and interactions between the many departments on set were described in detail. Included were animators, maintenance, archivists, and VRX and CGI professionals. Flanagan stressed that the final product was a "tapestry of thousands of artists."



"Wildwood" is a dark fantasy stop-motion animated film directed by Travis Knight and produced by Laika Studios. UConn alum Maggie Flanagan returned to Storrs to shed light on their experience working as a puppet maintenance generalist on the set of "Wildwood."

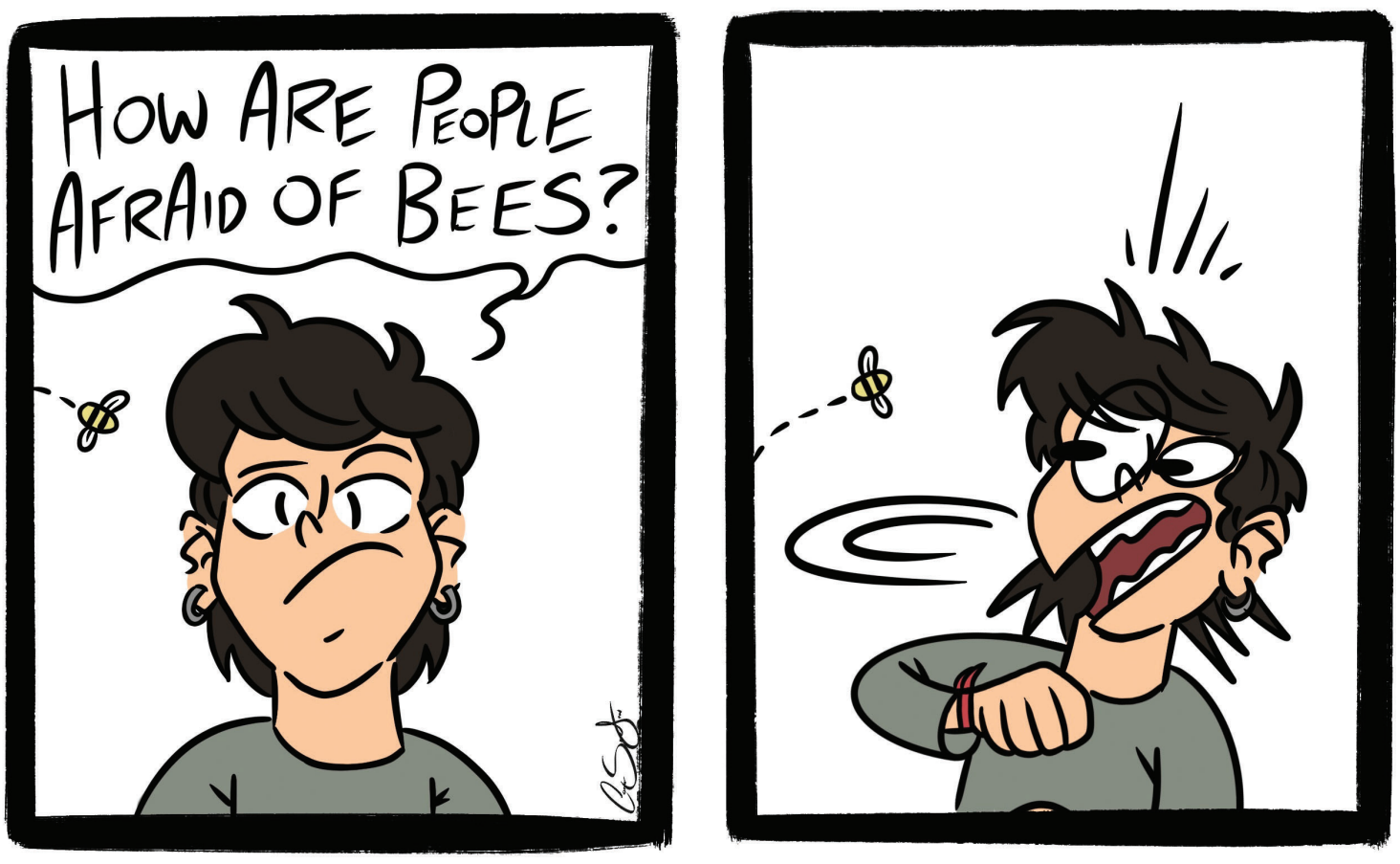
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Despite the technical work they were describing, Flanagan didn't shy away from keeping the crowd engaged and laughing with light-hearted anecdotes about horse hip replacements, fender benders and cottontail rabbits — all of which did, in fact, relate to stop motion animation and puppetry.

Toward the end of the evening, guest moderator Allison Paul, an associate professor of illustration and animation, opened the floor to the in-house and online audiences for a Q&A session with Flanagan. This was an opportunity for them to bestow their wisdom on the audience, offering advice for those looking to work in puppetry.

Flanagan spoke on staying inspired outside of work, saying "you can't draw from an empty well," and emphasizing the importance of being a team player and knowing when to "swallow your pride" when working on largescale projects.

Flanagan closed off with a reminder that despite this being a confusing era for artists, they believe that stop motion is going to have a "renaissance" as the demand for human-made art increases. The people in attendance at their talk were a testament to this, representing appreciation for human-made craft.



COMIC BY CONNOR SZREJNA, STAFF ARTIST/THE DAILY CAMPUS