In Proximity
Tyree Dillihay
Season 3 Episode 24
Final Transcript

Paola Mardo: I saw a lot of Steph in his mannerisms and physicality and the way he shot the ball and that is totally Steph Curry.

Tyree Dillihay: Yes. Stephan came in. We worked with Andre Iguodala. We brought Andre in to design plays. So we had a big, long conference room printing out these little tiny monopoly size versions of the characters to kind of move around like chess pieces, X's and O's. And we're just moving these things around, calling plays.

Paola Mardo: Wow.

Tyree Dillihay: And to say that's my job!

Paola Mardo: I know!

Tyree Dillihay: What did you do today? Oh you know, just ran some plays with Andre Iguodala.

[LAUGHTER]

[0:29 - “In Proximity Theme” by Ludwig Göransson]

[VOICEOVER]

Paola Mardo: You're watching and listening to In Proximity. I'm Paola Mardo, and today I'm talking to Tyree Dillihay, Director of GOAT. Tyree Dillahay is a director at Sony Pictures Animation, where he worked alongside Adam Rosette on GOAT, the new animated sports film about Will, a small town goat with big time dreams of going pro at Roarball, an animal powered form of basketball where paws and claws are all part of the game. The cast includes Caleb McLaughlin, Gabrielle Union, Jenifer Lewis, and Stephen Curry, who also produces with Unanimous Media. Tyree grew up in Inglewood, California, where a career in Hollywood seemed like a distant dream, but a love for cartoons and comics, inspiration from films by Spike Lee and John Singleton, and an interest in talent for drawing catapulted him into a career in animation where he's directed for shows like Bob's Burgers. GOAT is Tyree's feature directorial debut, and I caught up with him just days before the film premiered at the US Box Office as the number one animated film.

By the following week, it was the number one film overall. On the podcast, we talked about what it took to direct GOAT from world building to characters and story, and how Tyree has navigated a career in animation, in part due to his talent and skill, and a supportive mother who taught him to dream big. Here's my conversation with Tyree Dillihay.

[VOICEOVER ENDS]

[2:03 - "KN 9 to 5” by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: Welcome to In Proximity, Tyree Dillihay.

Tyree Dillihay: Thanks for having me, Paola.

Paola Mardo: Very excited to be talking to you about your film. Congratulations on GOAT!

Tyree Dillihay: Thank you. Thank you.

Paola Mardo: How does it feel? We're talking just a few days before it comes out in theaters. How does it feel right now for you?

Tyree Dillihay: The realization of a dream. This has been a seven and a half year journey to get to this point.

Paola Mardo: Wow.

Tyree Dillihay: So within days, it'll really be real. But the early screenings have been great, but now we're going to see what happens when people actually pay money for a ticket to see the work that we've been making.

Paola Mardo: That's amazing. And you just came back, you told me from Oakland, Bay Area.

Tyree Dillihay: Yeah.

Paola Mardo: Bay Area where you screened. And of course, Steph Curry is executive producer on the film and also a voice.

Tyree Dillihay: Yes.

Paola Mardo: The character he plays is …

Tyree Dillihay: Lenny Williamson.

Paola Mardo: Yes.

Tyree Dillihay: Yeah, we picked the smallest guy to play the tallest player.

Paola Mardo: Amazing. I loved seeing his name in the credits because I had no idea that he played that role.

Tyree Dillihay: Yeah, isn't that trippy?

Paola Mardo: Yeah.

Tyree Dillihay: You see Steph and you're like, wait, that was you?

Paola Mardo: Yeah.

Tyree Dillihay: I love that.

Paola Mardo: I love that character. But yeah, you just came back from the Bay where Steph has obviously a huge fan base and that's sort of a hometown for him in terms of his sports team. What was that crowd like?

Tyree Dillihay: It's good to get that local turnout because they're excited. And I think it kind of speaks to the transcendent or unifier that sports and movies are. They kind of bring you together and kind of give you the sense of civic pride. And they really turned out for the movie, for Stephen, for us. And it felt good. The energy felt good, felt right.

Paola Mardo: That's awesome. Now you are a native Angeleno from Inglewood, California.

Tyree Dillihay: Yes. I'm not an import.

[LAUGHTER]

Paola Mardo: You are not. You are born and raised out here.

Tyree Dillihay: Yeah.

Paola Mardo: Were you looking forward to working with Steph or were you like, no?

Tyree Dillihay: No. I mean, obviously I admired him from afar because he's literally a living GOAT. But working with him on something that's so near and dear to my heart, that was the natural part. It's like, wait, I get to put two of my loves together and then it even eventually expanded out of those two. And those two started with cartoons and sports.

Paola Mardo: Yeah.

Tyree Dillihay: And then we just expanded from there.

Paola Mardo: Yeah.

Tyree Dillihay: Yeah.

Paola Mardo: Well, tell me about how the project came together. So you are director of GOAT, and I know there's hundreds of people that come together to make this movie, but what was the first, was it a phone call? Was it a meeting? How did you hear about the project and how did that sort of the origin story of GOAT come together?

Tyree Dillihay: Yeah. So Kristine Belson, the president, had an itch and that itch was to make another animal movie. In the past, they've made a few animal movies, Surfs Up being a really big one, Vivo being a recent one. It's like, "I need another animal movie." And to show y'all paths cross, Unanimous had an overall deal at Sony at the time. And they were trying to find a project where Sony Animation and Unanimous could work together.

Paola Mardo: And Unanimous is Steph Curry's production company.

Tyree Dillihay: Correct. Correct. So, came up with this idea about animals playing basketball. Go. The first iteration before I got there was about farm animals playing basketball. And it's like,

that's fun, that's cute. But how do we age that up? How do we make it more visceral, more of a cinematic experience? So me as a director, I came in with a take where it's like, well, what if we took basketball in an all animal world and made it for animals and not just animals, the apex predators of the animal world. And then we eventually came to this new league called Roarball, regionally organized animal roar ball. It came up with these fantastical courts, et cetera. They can use more appendages, more capabilities. So we like to say the animals can use their paws, claws, hooves, tails, tongues, wings, whatever. These things you can't use in basketball. They can use two feet, they can use four. And then the terrains and the length of the court, a regular basketball court is like 94 feet.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. What is it in this one?

Tyree Dillihay: 120 yards.

Paola Mardo: Gigantic.

Tyree Dillihay: Yeah. You got to give the animals room to hit full stride. And then in our world, we don't play on parquet wood floors. We play in different terrains and different climates for obstacles and put Will at the center. And then that's ... Will at the center is really based on Stephen's story. It's being an underdog, being underrated and kind of today's version of a David and Goliath type story where the little guy beats the big guy and then taking a little piece of not only his high school to college to NBA journey, but in his NBA journey, how he essentially changed the game. You know, there was a period where elder statesmen said, “There's no way you could win with ‘small ball.’” Here we are four championships later. So we shouldn't be hearing no when it comes to our dreams about things we want to pursue. We don't need to ask for permission for that. We pursue with full power and full willpower. That's a big reason why we named him Will.

Paola Mardo: Will power. Ooh, I love that.

Tyree Dillihay: Yeah.

[7:12 - “Good Times” by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: Yeah. I thought that was ... I mean, so many different details I really love, but I love that about the game.

Tyree Dillihay: Thank you.

Paola Mardo: How it was molten lava, rocks and then sometimes vines would come out.

Tyree Dillihay: Hey, stop spoiling!

Paola Mardo: Oh, sorry. Yes. Bleep me here. But I just thought it was a really inventive way to make it a sports movie and kind of up the game a little bit more. And it made it so fun to watch too.

Tyree Dillihay: Thank you. Thank you.

Paola Mardo: Talk about the world building because I saw sort of like a painterly style,

Tyree Dillihay: Yeah.

Paola Mardo: Especially in the backdrops and the environments. But then there's so many modern touches and also a lot of detail on each of the animals. But you got them wearing sneakers. There was tunnel walks happening. There was a lot of traditional animation, but also cool new pop culture stuff. How do you even begin to create that world?

Tyree Dillihay: Well, starting with the look. So our production designer, art director, we got Jang Lee and Rich Daskas. They really led the charge on creating a look that was lush, immersive and painterly. So we're big fans of impressionistic painting. You know, Sargent, Cézanne, more modern painters like Richard Schmid, where you get detail without having to do a whole lot. Minimal brush strokes will create the look of a fully overgrown city. So that was a big starting point for us. The other thing was working with the wizards over at Imageworks. They're incredible. They literally are up for the challenge of doing new things. So we said, how do we make each of these environments different? So we got the jungle region. Like I said, it's lush, it's overgrown. It's like Brooklyn meets Brazil.

Paola Mardo: And then we started off with a full spectrum. So that's the lowest actually. That's the lowest strata of this animal world. And then the highest strata would be like the Arctic. And we've always posited that as like Silicon Valley meets Icy Dubai.

Paola Mardo: Oh, interesting.

Tyree Dillihay: Right. So it's like you take these naturalistic materials of ice and glass and then you kind of blend those with different metals. And materials. And it's just the balance of those things.

Paola Mardo: Yeah.

Tyree Dillihay: But we didn't stretch too far to make it too alien because then it becomes unfamiliar. And the audience buy-in is a little ... It's costly. Me, personally, I feel like basketball sits at the intersection of everything that's cool. It's like fashion, music, sports, art, and tech. So it's natural to kind of infuse all these things that are a part of the world.

Paola Mardo: Yeah.

Tyree Dillihay: Like you mentioned tunnel walks. NBA tunnel walks are almost like Paris Fashion Week.

Paola Mardo: It is now, yeah.

Tyree Dillihay: Right, they wear outfits literally for different outfits for 82 games. That's great opportunity to show personal, individual style. And I'm sure there's some incentive for brands to kind of use these tall, statue-esque athletic models, if you will, to promote brands and whatnot. And who has more visibility in sports than NBA athletes? So we took inspiration from that. We got a great costume designer, stylist, Dominique Dawson. She brought style and flair to each of the characters. I think a big challenge for her was dressing all the animals

Paola Mardo: Yeah.

Tyree Dillihay: Because she's used to dressing humans.

Paola Mardo: What are their measurements?

[LAUGHTER]

Tyree Dillihay: Right? Yeah. In particular, like Jett, who's played by Gabrielle Union. She's a black leopard, extremely long torso. But you look at what she eventually came up for the styling, you'll see the proportions. She's got a crop top hoodie, what a long leotard, and a leotard extends all the way. There's no visual breakup. We're really being thoughtful with the styling and the world to make sure it feels like a real sport. And I think we accomplished it.

Paola Mardo: That's so cool. How does that work? Because I can see how that costume design, for example, works in live action, right? Yeah. But for animation, I mean, I guess in live action, costume design, they also draw.

Tyree Dillihay: It's the same process.

Paola Mardo: So is it that process? Okay. I just answered the question. No, please elaborate.

Tyree Dillihay: No, no no. I love that you're thinking about it. Because you would think because it's a different medium that it would require a different process. But in reality, the processes are congruent. There's really no difference. So we start with 2D artwork, Dominique work hand in hand with actual painters, digital painters, and they conceive all these looks. There's a lot of looks that are on the cutting room floor, much like they do in real costume designing and styling, where you got a rack of clothes and you're not going to wear that entire rack. You're going to probably get two pulls and it's like, okay, that's what we're wearing. It's the same process.

[12:05 - "Good Times" by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: Was there a character that you identified with the most or you saw some of yourself in?

Tyree Dillihay: Identification. I mean, I guess Will. Underdog story. I come from Inglewood, California. And honestly, I'm lucky to be here on this couch sitting across from you.

Paola Mardo: Oh man.

Tyree Dillihay: From where I come from, it easily could have been a statistic very easily. Very, very easily. But I did it. And the fact that I'm doing something so different, there's no other examples of what I do from where I come from, at least in the animation industry. I have friends in leadership positions, directing designers of footwear, you name it, but not from Inglewood, California.This is a rare thing.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. Can you talk, I guess maybe segue a little bit, because I did want to ask about your background and how you got into animation. A lot of folks who watch the show are maybe emerging filmmakers, artists, and creatives, and maybe are like you coming from places that don't always have folks to look up to that, "Oh, they came from my town, they made it in Hollywood." So how did you do it? Because you've been in the business for like 20-ish plus years now?

Tyree Dillihay: Yeah, I've been in it for a minute.

Paola Mardo: You're a veteran. We'll say that.

[LAUGHTER]

Tyree Dillihay: Yeah, I'm seasoned. So I think growing up, it was just a love of television, movies, cartoons. Just love this stuff.

Paola Mardo: Was there a particular cartoon that made you go, "Ooh, I want to do that."

Tyree Dillihay: It was all of it. I mean, I'll tell you some favorites. I literally go through the eras, Merri Melodies, Looney Tunes, Tom and Jerry was a big one.

Paola Mardo: Classics.

Tyree Dillihay: Classics, right? And then you get into action shows, the G.I. Joe's, the He-Man's of the world, then you go a little further and then it's like, okay, now we're into more serious cartoons. You get into anime, you start discovering more mature things, the Ninja Scroll's of the world, the Akira's. Then you get into comics and you're looking at Todd McFarlane, like Jim Lee. I've always been attracted to the art. I can tell you right now, sorry, but I wasn't a big reader of these things. I was a big visual person. And then again, I came up in the real time era of actually seeing Spike Lee come into his own from the original films. I saw She's Gotta Have It when I wasn't supposed to see it.

[LAUGHTER]

Paola Mardo: Wow, stuck in the theater.

Tyree Dillihay: Yeah. Well, I wasn't-

Paola Mardo: Really in a theater, by the way.

Tyree Dillihay: No, I saw it on cable. You're not supposed to be watching She's Gotta Have It at that age. But what blew my mind was like, wait, a black creator directed, produced, edited, starred, wrote this thing? That was mind blowing. So seeing Spike Lee and then later John Singleton, John Singleton was really transformative for me because Boyz n the Hood is about where I come from. So seeing my neighborhood, my location represented on the big screen with characters that I can completely relate with on a personal level, but also on a familial level. There was a lot of touch points in Boyz n the Hood that really resonated with me because I was literally going through some of those things. I didn't want to get revenge on somebody for killing my brother, but there's a lot of other things that I relate to, like the father-son relationship that he had, but the opposite being with me with my mother, like a single parent and co-parenting, the relationship with friends, seeing dead friends. I've been through that stuff. And again, like I said, it's wild that I'm here doing what I do coming from where I came from, but thank God for family, in particular my mother and grandparents for giving me that support to be like, "It's okay to be different, dream big and do what it is that you're passionate about. " Still passionate about it.

[16:03 - "Good Times" by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: How did you start animating, I guess? Did your mom give you a pen or something or did you just start drawing? What was that first?

Tyree Dillihay: Yeah, that's a really good question. It always starts with just drawing. Sitting in your living room, I don't know if you ever did this, you lay down on the floor and it's like you're laying flat on your belly and you got your feet kicking up in the air and you're just drawing.

Paola Mardo: Yep. Doodling.

Tyree Dillihay: Yeah, doodling. Just letting your imagination take you to worlds that you've never been. And it just started with that. And getting fed comic books and Mad Magazine was a big inspiration for me because I liked the fact that they took pop culture and turned it on its head. I've always been interested in that form of satire. And then again, just kept drawing, mimicking comic books, mimicking paintings. My mother and I would always go to museums. My mother's very artsy. I like to call her the first Blerd, Black Nerd.

Paola Mardo: The first blerd. Love that.

[LAUGHTER]

Tyree Dillihay: Yeah. She's like the OG blerd. Love that. She took me to my first comic book conventions.

Paola Mardo: Wow.

Tyree Dillihay: She took me to see Heavy Metal when I wasn't supposed to see Heavy Metal. Everybody knows what Heavy Metal is. That's the first R-rated cartoon.

Paola Mardo: Wow. And your mom took you.

Tyree Dillihay: My mom took me!

Paola Mardo: Because she saw something in you and like your talent and your interest.

Tyree Dillihay: Not that I'm some weird prepubescent boy that's going to get off looking at this film. She was like, "No, you're artist and you'll appreciate this."

Paola Mardo: Yeah.

Tyree Dillihay: Yeah, you're absolutely right. She saw that in me and she kept feeding it.

Paola Mardo: That's awesome.

Tyree Dillihay: And she didn't try to prevent it from happening. Most parents, we did go through a period of that, but there was most parents where they'll kind of shield you or want to stop you from being an artist because they think you won't survive. But I mean, up here thriving right now.

Paola Mardo: Dream big.

Tyree Dillihay: Dreaming big.

Paola Mardo: Did you grow up playing basketball? Were you a big basketball fan or fan player, both?

Tyree Dillihay: Yeah, I played a little basketball. I still play. I'm a weekend warrior. But the thing about me and basketball, I have a love, hate relationship because number one, no, I didn't play in high school, etc. And the reason why is because number one, I put more focus and emphasis on art and I hated running. I literally hated it. And the reason why I hated it is because my mother used running as a form of discipline. We stayed two miles away from the Great Western Forum. That's where the showtime eras Lakers used to play and even a little bit of the Shaq and Kobe era. So my mother would give me a choice. You want to get grounded or you want to run. And I didn't want to get grounded, so I ran.

Paola Mardo: So you had to run.

Tyree Dillihay: I had to run, but that running, that kept me out of trouble.

Paola Mardo: There you go.

Tyree Dillihay: I didn't get in trouble very often. But no, I'm actually joking about the blame, but that did put me ... I have an aversion to running. But again, I loved putting…

Paola Mardo: So interesting.

Tyree Dillihay: The more energy and time and passion into art. As much as I love sports, I mean, but my baby, the love of my life is art.

Paola Mardo: I guess I wanted to ask because there's so many fun references and details that ... I feel like you have to know basketball to actually meet this, but you don't have to know all of basketball to watch this.

Tyree Dillihay: No, not at all.

Paola Mardo: Just going back to Roarball, did you have basketball consultants? Was Steph a consultant? How did you guys figure out the rules and culture of sports within this movie?

Tyree Dillihay: Yeah, that's a great question. Well, number one, my co-director on the film, Adam Rosette, he and I are both NBA basketball nuts. You got to be a hoop head. When we brought him on as a co-director, it's like, I need somebody by my side in the trenches that knows the game, but not only knows the game, because to your point, it's not just about the sport. It's about the story and the characters. So he's just as passionate and a nut about sports that he is about story characters and emotion. So let's start there. And then second, when you have Stephen Curry on your team, literally on your team, you might want to go to that wellspring and get all the knowledge you can. So he, alongside with Erick Peyton, CEO of Unanimous, we got a lot of great insight to NBA information and some behind the scenes. Got a shout out Tiffany Williams. We went to locker rooms. We went to the Chase Center. We got a tour of the underbelly of the stadium.

Paola Mardo: Oh, cool.

Tyree Dillihay: And then last but not least, we worked with Andre Iguodala. Andre Iguodala was there for all of those championships with Stephen. And we like to call him a beautiful basketball mind.

Paola Mardo: What does that mean?

Tyree Dillihay: So we brought Andre in to design plays. Had it been left to Adam, co-director and my devices, it would've took us weeks, if not months, to design these plays. Andre knocked this stuff out in two hours in a session with us.

Paola Mardo: Wow.

Tyree Dillihay: Yeah, literally.

Paola Mardo: So the actual plays that the team runs in the movie were like you worked it out with Andre Iguodala. That's so cool.

Tyree Dillihay: Yeah. Literally Xs and Os. We had a big, long conference room. We taped it up to look like the basketball perimeter lines. And then thank you Joshua Perez for printing out these little tiny monopoly size versions of the characters to kind of move around like chess pieces and Xs and Os. We had production assistants filming everything on smartphones and we're just moving these things around, calling plays.

Paola Mardo: Wow.

Tyree Dillihay: We might have took a couple of things from some popular playbooks. Shall not be mentioned, but if you're noticing them in the film…

[LAUGHTER]

Paola Mardo: References, references. Homages.

Tyree Dillihay: If you notice them in the film, you're great at basketball. You really know the inside track. But working with him made it authentic and it's on the screen. He designed plays for characters. We told him what the emotional arcs were, who needs to have the ball in these moments. And he made plays for it on the fly.

Paola Mardo: Wow.

Tyree Dillihay: Yeah. Great, great NBA IQ. Yeah. They talk about high IQ players. Andre Iguodala is that.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. That's amazing. That's so cool. I can imagine you guys in a conference room running plays with these little characters. That's so fun.

Tyree Dillihay: And to say that's my job!

Paola Mardo: I know.

Tyree Dillihay: What did you do today? Oh, just ran some plays with Andre Iguodala.

[22:17 - “Juno Arp Stinger” by Ken Nana]

Paola Mardo: So the film follows a goat named Will played by Caleb McLaughlin, and he's a small animal who has this big dream of playing Roarball. And he does get that chance. It's like a once in a lifetime opportunity. And not only does he get to play Roarball, he gets to play alongside his hero, his idol, Jet played by Gabrielle Union. And so there's this sort of rookie meets veteran relationship there and Jett isn't quite happy about this setup, but the team owner wants Will to be part of the team. There's the business aspect of sports that you're also exploring here. And then there are other team members that come into play. But I wanted to ask about the themes because it is a sports film. It's an animated film, but it's a sports film. And sports movies, there's so many big themes about dreaming big, teamwork and sort of believing in yourself, those sorts of things. But what was important for you to kind of follow in terms of theme or highlight through the work that you're doing with the movie?

Tyree Dillihay: Yeah. I mean, something I mentioned before about not putting a ceiling on dreams, but there's, just to add on, the community aspect.

Paola Mardo: Right.

Tyree Dillihay: Something I touched on again, but I'll reiterate, it's like the transcendent nature of sports, how it gives you a sense of pride in self and community. And also the fact that your friends, your family and fans can propel you to even greater heights than you yourself could have imagined. You know, prime example last night when we showed at the Grand Lake with Stephen and family was that they've supported him for so long on the court. Now they're supporting efforts off the court. And that's what I mean by the transcendent nature of sports and movies. They're great unifiers and it's good to have people see themselves and these characters, these themes and these stories.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. I love that. There's a quote that they say in the movie, “Roots Run Deep,” which I really love.

Tyree Dillihay: Yeah, that's our mantra.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. And I love that when his hometown is behind him, his best friends, but also the folks at the little diner, again, don't want to give too much away, but there's a really hometown feel to that.

Tyree Dillihay: Yes.

Paola Mardo: And I love that they just ... I think the fame and the fortune is cool and fun for Will, but when it comes down to it, it's ... And actually one of the best moments of the film for me was when he takes Jet home because they're both from the same town.

Tyree Dillihay: Exactly.

Paola Mardo: I love that about the movie.

Tyree Dillihay: Thank you.

Paola Mardo: Jett's sort of, is reminded about why she did this in the first place, why she loves the game so much, and it all comes back to community.

Tyree Dillihay: Yes.

[25:05 - "Good Times" by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: I wanted to ask also, you talked about maybe some real life plays that maybe you referenced. What about movies? Any influences? I have to say as a nineties kid, I mean, Space Jam is THE animated sports movie. I loved that movie growing up. And shout out also to the sequel that Proximity produced, Space Jam Two, whether it's films or even comic books or, I don't know, animated shows, anime, anything.

Tyree Dillihay: Oh my God. There's so many to list. But yeah, obviously Space Jam, Space Jam Two are on the list because those are quintessential basketball films, starring literally GOATS and Michael Jordan and LeBron James. Yeah. Why wouldn't we watch that? And it's got animated characters. We want to see how they're treating it and how we can differentiate ourselves. But yeah, but of course we looked at films like Hoosiers. I mean, honestly, we looked at every damn near every sports film under the sun. I mean, I took it all the way back from The Fish That Saved Pittsburgh. You ever heard of that?

Paola Mardo: No. I'm going to have to look that up.

Tyree Dillihay: Yeah. Look that one up. That's old school.

[LAUGHTER]

Paola Mardo: Wait, what sport is that?

Tyree Dillihay: That's basketball. I know, right? It's like, yeah, what is that even about?

Paola Mardo: Okay, interesting.

Tyree Dillihay: A movie like that or you name it, Rocky, Any Given Sunday, Major League, Mighty Ducks, Rudy, Uncle Drew, Like Mike.

Paola Mardo: Wow. It just went deep.

Tyree Dillihay: Ted Lasso, Invincible. You name it, we saw it. Slap Shot. We saw it just to understand the through line of all of these films. Again, and you're trying to differentiate yourself.

Paola Mardo: Yeah.

Tyree Dillihay: Because at the end of the day, for us, we're trying to make a generation defining sports film in the way that those movies were generation defining. When you think of The Space Jam, 1996 and had another animated basketball film in years. Space Jam. Think about that. That's 30 years ago.

Paola Mardo: Yeah.

Tyree Dillihay: That's 30 years ago.

Paola Mardo: It's crazy.

Tyree Dillihay: Yeah.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. And it was crazy to see this iconic NBA goat in a movie with the Looney Tunes. So that's just a, I guess, generation defining sports film as well. But I love that that's the approach you took. I mean, after watching all those films, what was the through line that you guys saw and how do you want to sort of spin that around in your film?

Tyree Dillihay: The through line was, how do you make people fall in love with these characters? Who are we going to follow an emotional journey with? Who do we want to invest an hour and a half with and believe and come out of this film inspired? But I think part of that is just, again, taking a little bit of Steph's story, which has been played out in front of the world and truly understanding how underrated, underestimated he was, and then just putting that through our lens, through our medium.

Paola Mardo: Will, I saw a lot of stuff in his mannerisms and physicality and the way he shot the ball. And that is totally Steph Curry.

Tyree Dillihay: Yes.

Paola Mardo: So yeah, did he have any reactions to that or?

Tyree Dillihay: He's super pumped to see it. We also had the benefit of animators that played basketball.

Paola Mardo: Oh, wow.

Tyree Dillihay: This was a dream come true project for them. Pep, Adam, Sang, Derek, Chad, all those guys. They play the sport.

Paola Mardo: Were you nervous to screen it for Steph for the first time?

Tyree Dillihay: Yes. Yeah. I think we're nervous to screen it to anybody.

[LAUGHTER]

[28:48 - "Good Times" by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: As director, can you talk about were there scenes or characters that you had the most fun set of working on? And you also had this amazing cast. So any behind the scenes stories, whether with Caleb or Gabrielle or any of the other Jenifer Lewis. Incredible character, by the way.

[LAUGHTER]

Tyree Dillihay: Oh, thank you.

Paola Mardo: She plays the team owner.

Tyree Dillihay: If you've seen-

Paola Mardo: Scene stealer.

Tyree Dillihay: Jenifer Lewis literally is a scene stealer in animation and in real life. I don't know if you saw her on the Jennifer Hudson show recently with the cast.

Paola Mardo: Oh, yes. Yes! Yeah.

Tyree Dillihay: She decided to break it out into an impromptu song with Jennifer Hudson.

Paola Mardo: So good.

Tyree Dillihay: Talk about a scene stealer, but not everybody brings such interesting talents to the table and they're all unique. So you got Caleb, that's your young gun. So he's going to bring this quirkiness and this charm, but at the same time, this emotional intelligence, you got Gabrielle, another veteran with a very strong voice.

Paola Mardo: Oh my God. Also, I went in just not looking up who was playing who, but I was like, I know that voice. It is such a good voice.

Tyree Dillihay: Yeah, Caleb and Gabrielle were early top choices.There was nobody else that could play these characters. But again, Gabrielle's performance, again, strong voice, but also she brought dimensionality to an otherwise seemingly two dimensional character. All her little ad libs and quirks that she added, and the same thing with Caleb. I added his little quirky charm. Great. Jenifer Lewis. We just talked about Jenifer. She's a nuclear time bomb, and it's a matter of containing that energy. But oh my God, when you piece it all together, it's magic. And then everybody else, like Stephen came in. This is his first, this is his debut voiceover as an animated character.

Paola Mardo: Amazing.

Tyree Dillihay: So I hold that title. As directing him, I'll take that. But Stephen was amazing. To use his word, he was coachable. He submitted to the process and came in with humility.

Paola Mardo: Cool. Well, can I talk about ... So there are diss tracks. Was that already baked into the script and you had to talk to your actors about…

Tyree Dillihay: Oh yeah.

Paola Mardo: Okay.

[CLIP: “Goat Tears” by GOAT Cast, Gregory Fletcher]

Mane Attraction: I know you think you're all baa-a-ad, but I'ma have you cryin’ like ba-ah-ah. You just got here, I'm the main attraction though. I'm the godfather, call me Pony Soprano.

[CLIP ENDS]

Tyree Dillihay: We actually had a stunt rapper.

Paola Mardo: Okay. Those are fun. Can you talk about directing those, the music videos? Because they're hilarious.

Tyree Dillihay: Oh, those are super hilarious. The “Goat Tears” video.

Paola Mardo: “Goat Tears.”

[LAUGHTER]

Tyree Dillihay: So for us, look, the inspiration came from what was going on in the zeitgeist. Diss tracks were flying around. Words were said. But we've also took a little bit of things from NBA past where athletes, athletes want to be rappers, rappers want to be athletes. And it was like, wouldn't that be a funny quirk if this horse decided to do a diss track as a means to get back at Will for putting the moves on him on the court? So directing these music videos, it's like I get to live out my inner Hype Williams dreams or Little X or Benny Boom. I get to live that out in that moment. And it was super fun.

Paola Mardo: Do you sketch it out yourself or do you work with the animators to, I don't know, break down the scenes? How does that, the planning of something like that?

Tyree Dillihay: So a lot of live action directors, I've even heard Ryan talk about this who just use storyboard artists. So we have a team of story artists. That's our pre-production process. So in animation, we live in what we call a low stakes environment for as long as possible before we get green lit. And that low stakes environment is doing and redoing and redoing and redoing the film in storyboards.

Paola Mardo: Gotcha.

Tyree Dillihay: So we're looking at our animatics on it. That's our dailies. And then we're carving the story from there.

Paola Mardo: Got it.

Tyree Dillihay: We go back to the page and sometimes we don't even go back to the page. We go back to the boards. In feature animation, they're called story artists, not storyboard artists. So it's less about, give me a script, I'll just do what's in the script. We ask them and encourage them to go deeper. It's deeper than what's on the page because we're trying to tell visual narrative here. And like I told you earlier, I don't read comic books. I look at the pictures. And I always told them, I said, if we, all of us, anybody that's doing in reviews at the time, if we cannot understand your story without the words, it's wrong. We need to visually track it. If we can visually track it, it's strong.

[33:32 - “In Proximity ‘90s” by Ludwig Göransson]

Paola Mardo: What were the challenges in making this over the course of seven years?

Tyree Dillihay: Just trying to find the right story. We had versions where there was more family involved with Will, and then he had to maintain a lie about playing Roarball. It's like, okay, well, that falls apart in the second act. We can't do that. Other versions, or maybe it's not the best friends, maybe he just has a sister. No, that's not going to work. So many versions just trying to get to the right version. Jett at one point was not a woman. Jett at one point was a man.

Paola Mardo: Wow.

Tyree Dillihay: It's like, wouldn't it be more contemporary story if you had a young man whose hero was an older woman? Isn't that new? Isn't that contemporary? Isn't that relevant?

Paola Mardo: Yeah.

Tyree Dillihay: Yes. Let's pursue that. So it's finding these new little things and it's great. It's great timing.

Paola Mardo: I know with the WNBA too. I mean, it's perfect. And honestly, when I realized Jett was a woman, I didn't even question it. I was like, "Oh, I love that. That's so cool."

Tyree Dillihay: And see, that's exactly, I get a little goosebump. That's exactly what we're talking about. You don't question it. You don't question it because it's true to the animal kingdom. We're not trying to ... People think you're trying to force an agenda like, "No, this is how it would work." And they're both equally, males and females are both equally physically yoked in this arena.

Paola Mardo: It totally works.

Tyree Dillihay: But then on the mainstream level, outside of the movie, culturally, it's right on time. The WNBA is having a massive explosion over this last, what, maybe five years. The new college players, NIL, we're right in tune with the world over something that we've been crafting over seven years.This is futurist stuff happening, literally coming to life, but that's what artists do. The futurist thinking is just something that artists do.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. I mean, you guys were literally ahead of the game, but I think just in terms of a challenge, that must be difficult because you don't have ... I mean, we are in an industry that loves comps and examples to sort of compare your work too, but you guys were creating something totally fresh and different. Still a sports movie and an animated movie and with animals, but putting your own unique twists. So I think believing in the vision and fighting for it's a big challenge, but definitely it's a must for something like this.

Tyree Dillihay: It is. It is. You know what the one tweak there, and this will be advice for anybody that wants to do this. We say fight because let's change fight to politically navigate.

Paola Mardo: Speak more, please.

Tyree Dillihay: I mean, because as filmmakers, especially when you're making major theatrical film, bigger budgets, that means that there's more cooks in the kitchen as it should be. You have to learn how to navigate that. So the fight, it shouldn't be you versus exec. It should be how do we collaborate and get the best of both worlds because we all want the same thing. Which is the best product possible. And you're only going to get that by collaborating, collaborating.

Paola Mardo: Especially as an artist. Yeah. How have you figured out ... Do you have any tangible advice for making those compromises or things you figured out on your journey?
Tyree Dillihay: Speaking from experience, I think whenever I've gotten notes, our process is we like to ... What is the note under the note? And do not take this personally if you truly are working with people, which I would hope that want the same goal, which is the best product. You as a filmmaker, you as a creative person that are at the helm of this thing, they put you there for a reason. And the reason is to protect the vision from anyone.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. It's collaboration, but being smart about it too.

Tyree Dillihay: Be smart about it. Be smart about it. They like to call it ... It's the Hollywood, it's the film business. It's an entertainment business. You have to balance commerce with creativity and not everybody can do that. That's a skill on it to itself.

Paola Mardo: Yeah. That you definitely have, over the course of your career.

Tyree Dillihay: Look, this is my first feature film. Yeah. I've been in animation for 20 years plus, but this is my first feature film. But I've learned a lot. I've learned a lot. And like I said, yes, it's been fights, "fights," but it's been good spirited fights because again, everybody wants the same ... Who wants to make a bad movie? Nobody wants to make a bad movie. We all want to make the greatest movie possible. That's what we're all fighting for.

[38:08 - "Prox Recs Theme" with Ludwig Göransson and Ken Nana]

Paola Mardo: Tyree, we've come to the part of the show where I ask you for a rec. We call it Prox Recs, and it's the segment where our guest basically shares a recommendation for our audience. It could be something that inspired you in your journey as a filmmaker, or maybe just something that you use or that you would recommend to folks wanting to sort of follow a career path like you have. What would your rec be?

Tyree Dillihay: There's a documentary about the fashion designer, Alexander McQueen. I think it's called McQueen. It's really good. What I like about it is obviously it starts from his humble beginnings as a child and then working his way up to his own brand, but he's such a tortured soul. Seeing his creative process, but all the hell that he went through to be world renowned designer to get the respect and admiration, it is inspiring. Even though it's a tragic story, it's really inspiring. And actually had me in tears on a plane one day. I didn't appreciate that part, but it's really good.

Paola Mardo: Cool. That tends to happen on planes for some reason. To movies up in the air.

Tyree Dillihay: Yeah. It's like, I don't want nuts right now. I need a kleenex.

[LAUGHTER]

Paola Mardo: Oh man, but thank you for the recommendation. I think that's a great one for folks to check out.

Tyree Dillihay: Thank you.

Paola Mardo: And thank you for being on the show. Tyree, it was a real pleasure.

Tyree Dillihay: Thanks Paola. Appreciate it. This has been amazing.

[39:41 - “In Proximity Theme” by Ludwig Göransson]

[VOICEOVER]

Paola Mardo: In Proximity is a production of Proximity Media.

The show is hosted, directed and produced by Paola Mardo.

Executive producers are Ryan Coogler, Zinzi Coogler, and Sev Ohanian.

Theme song and additional music is by Ludwig Göransson.

Patrick Epino is our co-director and director of photography.

Ken Nana is our sound designer and mix engineer.

Our editors are Patrick Epino, Ken Nana, and Ben Caloza

The production team includes Celine Mendiola, Joy Woo, and Alexandria Santana.

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[VOICEOVER ENDS]