



# Let's Talk About Jennifer Lee

DISNEY CHIEF CREATIVE OFFICER OPENS THE DOOR FOR NEW VOICES, PUSHING INCLUSIVENESS AND CULTURAL AUTHENTICITY. TONIGHT, SHE RECEIVES THE PRESS CLUB'S DISTINGUISHED STORYTELLER AWARD

BY CHRIS PALMERI

When Jennifer Lee was asked to help her graduate school friend Phil Johnston write *Wreck-it-Ralph*, a video-game-themed animated movie for the Walt Disney Co., it was supposed to be an eight-week gig.

That call opened a new door for Lee, who is now the chief creative officer of Walt Disney Animation Studios, and one of the key people behind the company's *Frozen* and *Zootopia* franchises.

With 2013's *Frozen*, Lee became the first woman both to direct a major Disney animated picture and to deliver a film for any studio that surpassed \$1 billion at the box office. She has since been part of a creative renaissance at Disney, which celebrates its 100th birthday next year. In her current role, she has championed a diverse group of talent on and off the screen.



For those achievements, Lee tonight is receiving the Los Angeles Press Club's Distinguished Storyteller Award for Storytelling Outside of Journalism.

"Jennifer upended fairy tales with *Frozen* and broke barriers for women in animation and in Hollywood," said Press Club President Lisa Richwine. "Her creative storytelling has had a lasting impact on the industry and on audiences around the world."

Lee, 51, was born in Rhode Island, and described herself as a "5-year-old disheveled mess," in an online chat last year. "I was a creative kid, who couldn't sit still and focus and had too many interests. I was too curious."

She majored in English at the University of New Hampshire, before heading to New York to work as a graphic artist and designer of audiobooks for Random House. Giving the commencement speech at her alma mater years later, Lee told students they need to trust in themselves and put their insecurities behind them.

"Self-doubt is consuming and cruel, and my hope today is that we can all collectively agree to ban it," she said. "Please know, from here on out, you are enough and, dare I say, more than enough."

Lee put doubt behind her when, as a young mother-to-be, she quit her career in publishing to pursue a degree in screenwriting at Columbia University. Her early screenplays won awards and put her on a path to Hollywood, "flying to Los Angeles with my breast pump," as she told the *LA Weekly*.

Then came the call from Disney. There, she joined the creative team for *Frozen*, helping shift the story from a battle of good vs. evil, based on Hans Christian Andersen's *The Snow Queen*, to one that empha-



sized the relationship between the sisters Anna and Elsa. The picture became a global blockbuster, taking in \$1.23 billion at the box office and winning the Oscar for Best Animated Feature.

Lee worked closely with the husband-and-wife songwriting team of Robert Lopez and Kristen Anderson-Lopez. Their hit "Let

It Go" went from being a YouTube phenomenon to the bane of many parents' ears. It reached the point that Lee would jokingly apologize for the soundtrack.

"A year ago, I'd meet people who, when they found out who I was, they'd say, 'Oh, we love the songs!'" she told the *Hollywood Reporter* in 2014. "Now they're like, 'Yep, we're still listening to those songs.' I've gone from, 'Thank you,' to, 'Sorry!'"

The 2016 film *Moana* began a shift at the studio, Lee has said. Disney began working even more closely with local musicians and artists, as well as oceanologists, to tell the story of a Pacific Island girl who sails off on a dangerous mission to help her people.

Lee had two films released in 2018: the *Wreck-it-Ralph* sequel *Ralph Breaks the Inter-*

Far left: In 2012, Jennifer Lee and Phil Johnston arrive at the premiere of *Wreck-It Ralph*, the film project that started her on a new path.

Top: Lee poses with Anna, Olaf and Elsa at the 2019 premiere of *Frozen 2*, accompanied by actor Alfred Molina, pictured at left, whom she married in 2021.



Top left and left: Did an interest in drawing and playing with dolls lead her into a future career in animation and storytelling?  
Above: Lee and producer Clark Spencer, attend the world premiere of *Encanto*, in November 2021.

A young joyful Lee, with her mother.

net, where she served as executive producer; and the live-action children’s science-fiction fantasy *A Wrinkle in Time*, which she co-wrote. That same year, Lee was put in charge of Disney’s famed animation studio after longtime head John Lasseter left amid allegations of improper behavior at work.

Her promotion turned out to be well-timed, as 2019’s *Frozen II*, which Lee also wrote and directed along with Chris Buck, took in even more money than its predecessor: \$1.45 billion globally.

“When I took this role, one of the first things I said is, ‘I want us to tell the stories of the world, but by the people of the world,’” she said in an interview last December with Australia’s ACMI.

Lee has made inclusiveness and cultural authenticity a hallmark of the studio’s work in films such as last year’s *Encanto*, about a Colombian family with magical powers.

A so-so performer in theaters in the midst of the pandemic, *Encanto* exploded in popularity when it was released on the Disney+ streaming service. Its soundtrack, featuring the irresistible song “We Don’t Talk About Bruno,” by Hamilton composer Lin-Manuel Miranda, ranked No. 1 on the Billboard Hot 100, becoming only the second song from a Disney animated film to reach the top spot on the chart.

“Jennifer Lee’s done an incredible job at

Disney animation, just in terms of hiring more people of color, more women into leadership roles,” Charise Castro Smith, one of two screenwriters on *Encanto*, told Bloomberg TV earlier this year. “I know there’s a lot of movies that are going to be coming out or that are in the pipeline that are going to be examples of that change.”

In 2021, Lee remarried, to actor Alfred Molina, in a ceremony presided over by Jonathan Groff, who voiced Anna’s love interest, Kristoff, in *Frozen*.

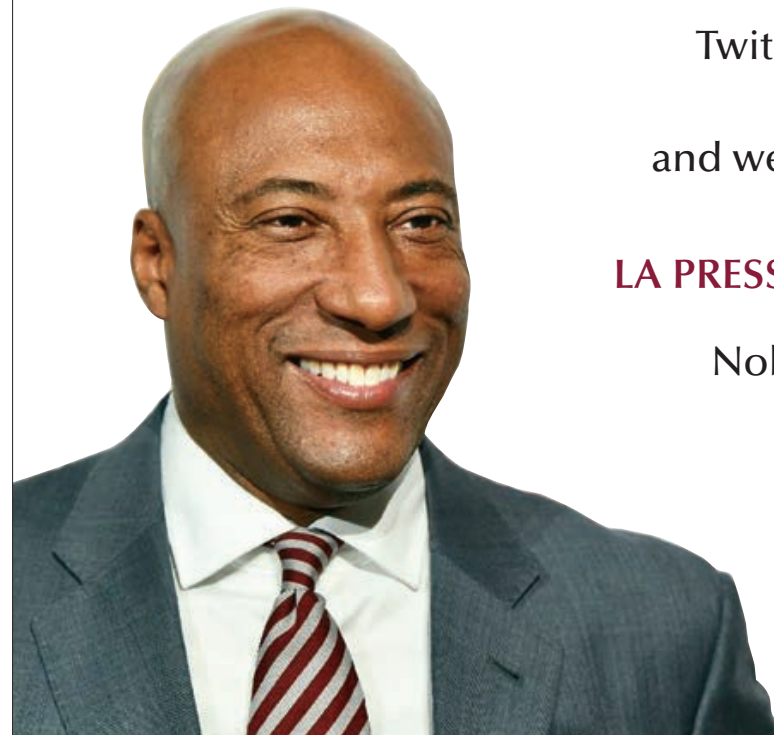
Lee continues to write and produce films, even as she oversees the studio’s overall work. Output is expanding, as the company now produces content for Disney+ as well as for theaters. The studio’s 61st animated film, *Strange World*, was released on Nov. 23. Its diverse cast includes comedian Jaboukie Young-White as a gay son looking for adventure beyond his father’s farm.

Today, the studio’s creative team is far more diverse than when Lee started, with nearly half of its writers being women.

“Talent is universal, but access is not,” Lee told attendees at an *Encanto* screening last year. “We’ve got to find the talent. We’ve got to create the access. The expansion of all kinds of diversity in our studio has exploded and should.”

With Lee at the helm, expect the explosion to continue.

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