



# VOICES OF RESISTANCE

Wes Anderson's new film, 'Isle of Dogs,' is not only star-studded and aesthetically pleasing. It also has a message.

BY ANNABEL BRADY-BROWN  
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Just hours before the world premiere of his ninth feature film, "Isle of Dogs," Wes Anderson is looking politely excited. Dressed in one of his signature herringbone tweed suits, he is seated in the middle of a curated table of Hollywood royalty that would set any director drooling.

Greta Gerwig is sandwiched between Bill Murray and Bryan Cranston; Anderson's co-screenwriters Jason Schwartzman and Roman Coppola occupy one end of the table; Liev Schreiber rubs shoulders with Jeff Goldblum at the other; Tilda Swinton cheers from the front row.

The list of cast members who are not present at the Berlin premiere is equally impressive, including Edward Norton, Scarlett Johansson, Yoko Ono and Frances McDormand.

So just how does Anderson do it? "Most of the actors here are people I've either worked with before or loved for years," he said at the Berlinale news conference. "I feel like this group of people is the first list we made ... of whom we'd like to have in the movie. And one thing about an animated movie is that you can't really say 'not available,' you know?" he said. "We can do it any time. We can do it at your house, at any hour of the day. There's just no excuse."

For the actors, too, the joy of working alongside such talent and being part of the Wes Anderson family is palpable. As Bill Murray quipped, "I'm all cranked up on chocolate and a little bit of champagne right now, so I'm going to say that being a voice

with this group is a little bit like being in the 'We Are the World' video. I think these are some of the great voices of cinema, and I'm very happy to be singing, even if I just get one verse."

For his verse, Murray voices Boss, a liver-spotted mutt and former mascot to a Little League baseball team. Still wearing his Megasaki Dragons sweater, Boss is one of five alpha dogs who form a pack to survive in Anderson's latest imaginary treasure.

Set 20 years in the future, "Isle of Dogs" takes place on the titular canine-filled island, after an outbreak of dog flu provokes the corrupt, cat-loving Mayor Kobayashi to expel every dog from the fantasy Japanese city of Megasaki to Trash Island, an offshore dumping ground that is as dank and depressing as its name suggests.

As with his first animated feature, "Fantastic Mr Fox" (2009), Anderson again turns to puppets and animals in "Isle of Dogs" to build a world that simply wouldn't be possible in a live-action film. The intricate and decidedly artisanal stop-motion process required the construction of 1,000 puppets and micro-sets and a crew of more than 670 - including 70 in the puppet department and 38 in the animation department - who shot every frame.

In the end, the film's 101 minutes are built from 130,000 stills. Two years in the making, the undertaking began with recording the voices. (An intertitle at the opening of the film informs us

that all dog barks have been translated into English.)

Unusually for an animation, four members of the down-and-out dog gang - Bob Balaban (King), Bryan Cranston (Chief), Bill Murray (Boss) and Edward Norton (Rex) - were able to record their voices together, an experience they recount when we get the chance to speak the day after the film's premiere.

"We've all recorded things either for the theater or for a record or something like that before," Murray said, "and you can be in your own booth and it feels a little lonely. But when you have the actual rhythm and tempo of other actors, it becomes alive, you've got someone else to work with, to bounce off."

Cranston, who plays Chief, a lonely stray mutt with a combative temper, added: "The four of us were at our podiums delivering our speeches, and it was fun to get a sense

of what Bill was doing, and what everyone was doing."

Anderson was in the room, although he didn't give much direction, choosing to trust the instincts of his actors and let them lead.

The fifth member of the dog gang, Jeff Goldblum, was in Los Angeles and unable to join that day, so he recorded his part later in a soundstage, speaking to Anderson over the phone. Goldblum plays Duke - a gossipy pooch, dapper despite his missing teeth, described in the press notes as a "bohemian mountain-dog." His is a role that, though peripheral, feels dreamed up, especially for Goldblum.

"Whatever process (Anderson) goes by, however he arrives at that, it's awful good. You want to be in a movie like this, which you're proud of and is a rare kind of masterpiece," Goldblum said. "Isle of Dogs" is their third project together.

"Very few directors (are able) to understand you and to appreciate you and to use you in a different, interesting way. The characters that he imagined me for and the way that he married us, me and the character, is very well done."

When Cranston was asked if he could see why Anderson cast him for the particular role of Chief, he said, "I seem to play a lot of damaged characters, and I like to because it gives me an opportunity to work through my own issues and use it as a therapeutic session," alluding to his iconic roles as Walter White from the acclaimed television series "Breaking Bad" and the father, Hal, in "Malcolm in the Middle."

To the same question, Murray nodded: "Last night, I felt, OK, I can see why that one's good for

me. I'm a sports dog, and I'm kind of a sports guy. Wes thinks that I'm, you know, an athlete."

While Murray resists the idea of being Anderson's personal mascot, his droll depiction as the sporty dog is perhaps part of a shorthand that has evolved from appearing in every one of Anderson's movies following his cult debut "Bottle Rocket" (1996) - from "Rushmore" (1998) to "The Grand Budapest Hotel" (2014).

So, what's it like to have this ongoing relationship, to work with the revered auteur over so many films?

"He tries to change the length of your clothes and everything else," Murray said. "He used to insist that the cuffs of my pants be 4 and a half to 5 inches too short. I don't do that anymore," he said, gesturing to his rose-printed denim flares.

"The problem is once he became a successful director, all the new people working around him were breathing like this," he said, making a terrified and reverential face, "just to be in his presence. There's a little bit of a kingdom around him. But to his credit, he does not endorse that. He does not promote people the more unctuous they are. Maybe he doesn't even see it?"

It's not only the return of familiar faces that makes "Isle of Dogs" feel like an assuredly Wes Anderson film. The film plumbs his eternal themes: the yearning for family and brotherhood that roused movies like "The Royal Tenenbaums" (2001), "The Life Aquatic with Steve Zissou" (2004) and "The Darjeeling Limited" (2007); it roots for the underdog (here, literally); and its narrative is propelled by an action-packed quest. In "Isle of Dogs," this is led by a 12-year-old ward of the mayoral household

named Atari Kobayashi, voiced by newcomer Koyu Rankin, who pilots a plane to Trash Island in search of his dog, Spots (Liev Schreiber).

There's something about the film's timeless story, though, that feels paradoxically prescient. Production started before President Donald Trump's election, but as the politics of the world began to shift, the film's mood and allegorical message felt like a timely balm. The homeless pooches and people of Megasaki fight for truth and rise up against a tyrant, and what begins as distracting haute design - an aesthete obsessing over every detail, every texture - starts to feel like a manifesto for patient and attentive care.

As Goldblum explained: "His movies are authentic, personal offerings, and call for gentility and kindness, compassion, inclusiveness, anti-bigotry, peacefulness, co-existence among people and species. So this movie, although addressing evergreen ideas, turns out to be particularly ripped from the headlines now."

"I hope that a story like this, so beautifully told and so entertainingly told, could move the ball forward in our real world. Who knows, but I'm romantic about that Dr. Seuss story, you know, 'Horton Hears a Who!' The whole world is in jeopardy, and everyone takes a part in the fight to save it except one person. It's only when that last person joins the union of the good fight that the voice is heard, that the critical mass is reached. So if we raise our voices, each of us in our own way - we can't do it as beautifully as Wes does it - but if we do, maybe we can enhance the story."

Courtesy of The Big Issue Australia / inspo ngo

Top center: A scene from Wes Anderson's "Isle of Dogs."

PHOTO COURTESY OF FOX SEARCHLIGHT/20TH CENTURY FOX

Top left: Bill Murray voices Boss.

Top right: Bryan Cranston voices Chief.

Bottom: Greta Gerwig plays Tracy, a foreign exchange student.

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