



Project Firefly primed for TV, big-screen debuts

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ORLANDO -- After 18 months quietly developing animation projects and clients, Project Firefly Animation Studios is about to make two big-screen debuts.

On Aug. 27, the Project Firefly-animated Farm Force -- the tale of three ordinary farm animals who gain super powers after being struck by a super-charged nuclear tornado -- has been selected to appear in Nickelodeon's Nextoon: The Nicktoons Film Festival 2005. The animated short, created by Ethan Long and produced by Robin Cowie (The Blair Witch Project), also will be simulcast on www.nicktoons.com and rerun on Aug. 28 on NickToons.

But the young company's crown jewel to date will come with the Feb. 10, 2006, big-screen debut of Universal Pictures' and Imagine Entertainment's Curious George movie based on the popular H.A. Rey children's book series about a little monkey who continually finds himself in a series of misadventures. Project Firefly is doing "20 to 25 percent of the animation," says studio President Dominic Carola, including the animation of George.

Produced by Brian Grazer, Ron Howard, Jon Shapiro and David Kirschner, the 82-minute film will feature the voices of Will Ferrell, Dick Van Dyke, Drew Barrymore, David Cross, Eugene Levy and Joan Plowright.

"To say we've had a big year is kind of an understatement I guess," says Carola. "We believed that we had the talent to do this successfully here in Orlando, and it's good to see it starting to gain speed now."

Finding a niche

Gaining speed doesn't quite do justice as far as describing what Project Firefly has accomplished in just a little more than a year.

Founded by Carola, Gregg Azzopardi, John Webber and Paulo Alvarado in March 2004 after the closure of Disney's Florida animation studios where the four partners worked, Project Firefly took up residence on the backlots of Universal Orlando with a staff of five.

Fast forward to today, and the 2-D/3-D animation studio now has 37 full-time staff, with another 25 who work as contractors on an as-needed basis with projects. In fact, notes Alvarado, a few of their former work mates at Disney have returned to the area to team up once again with the partners.

Webber says a couple of factors that have allowed Project Firefly to establish itself so quickly are the combined experience of the partners -- 50-plus years among them, including work on films such as The Lion King and Brother Bear -- and the work-style setup of the studio itself where most of the artists multitask. That, says Alvarado, "allows all of us an opportunity to do things that we might never get to do at a big studio. And we can still grow, but not have to get really big because we all share in the work."

Next on the studio's agenda: creation of original Project Firefly storylines.

"Taking on the projects we already are doing has given us the financial footing to now look ahead to doing what we always intended -- our own stories that we own the rights to," says Carola.

And, adds Azzopardi, "We are pretty close to getting there."

Friendly focus

With work on Curious George expected to be completed in November, Project Firefly is already working ahead on seven or eight other projects its name will be attached to, says Carola. While many projects can't be disclosed yet due to confidentiality agreements, Carola does say that the partners are still maintaining their Disney ties, working on animation for the entertainment giant's Pooh's Halloween and Brother Bear 2, among other things.

And while Project Firefly has been somewhat of a well-kept secret so far, expect that to change soon too, says Suzy Allen, vice president of film and digital media development for the Metro Orlando Film & Entertainment Commission.

"These guys are going to be one of our best success stories in the next few years," says Allen.

Pamela Tuscany-Warren, senior director of marketing and business development for Universal Studios' Florida Production Group, agrees and says Project Firefly is bringing "all kinds of energy" to the local industry.

All that aside, though, Carola says his focus will remain on the one area he and the partners believe is most critical to the studio's ultimate success: original content.

Says the veteran animator, "The ability to do our own original content -- that will be our ultimate measuring stick for success. That's when we will have truly arrived."

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