

## **Drawn to the light; Animators at Project Firefly are working to reignite some of the creative fires in Orlando.**

*Roger Moore, Sentinel Movie Critic. Orlando Sentinel.* Orlando, Fla.: Jan 31, 2006

Disney's \$7.4 billion acquisition of Pixar should bring back bragging rights to a studio that was founded on cartoons but -- ironically -- has spent much of the past decade running away from cartoons. The House the Mouse Built has in recent years earned more headlines for shuttering studios than drawing the hits.

It's an irony not lost on some in Orlando. For more than a decade, Disney Features Animation Florida, the studio that produced *Mulan*, *Lilo & Stitch* and *Brother Bear*, was home to some of Disney's most acclaimed and popular two-dimensional, or hand-drawn, cartoons.

But the parent company closed Features Animation Florida in early 2004, putting 258 Central Florida animators and animation employees out of work.

"All of us who were inspired to get into this sort of work by Disney were saddened by the direction things went, kind of ending with our studio closing," says Dominic Carola, a veteran of Disney's Orlando operation. "The Pixar deal will bring them back, pretty dramatically, I think, which is good for the whole industry."

Disney also announced last week that it was shutting down production on *Toy Story 3*, pretty much killing the in-house unit it created to make sequels to the Pixar hits to which it owned the rights. That closing means "there'll be consequences, a ripple effect, through the whole industry," Carola says.

In other words, more animators -- as many as 150 -- will be looking for work.

That's a bigger concern to Carola these days. He is president and one of the five partners of Project Firefly, the Orlando animation studio founded by some of those laid-off Disney Florida animators, pretty much the very day they lost their jobs. Nearly 30 animators, mostly Disney vets, work at Project Firefly now.

When Disney's Orlando studio closed, some of the artists moved to far-flung animation operations. But a few stayed -- at EA (video- game producers Electronic Arts), and at Project Firefly -- and made a go of it in the city that they called home.

"Disney shutting down was like having an asteroid hit," says Mary Kay Haseley, who used to run Disney's Florida animation studio and now is vice president for studio relations at Project Firefly. "All these little pieces flew off into their own orbits, doing new and original things."

What Project Firefly wants, Haseley says, is for some of those pieces to clump together, to do those original things here in Orlando. The five partners at Firefly haven't been able to employ many of the Orlando Disney animation alumni. But they have made a start.

A big deal, by George

When Curious George, the most famous monkey in children's literature, takes to the big screen, he'll spend one of his most curious moments bonding, coincidentally, with a firefly. Project Firefly did about 25 percent of the outsourced animation on the Universal Pictures 2-D animated film, due in theaters Feb. 10.

It was work Project Firefly had lined up pretty much the instant its founders set up shop. Still, delays with the production meant that the start-up had to wait a year before the Curious work came in and the Curious checks started to clear. But Carola calls that delay a "blessing."

"That gave us a year to do other subcontracting work, to train, to try digital animation projects, and just to figure out how to manage something like a big animated film," says Carola.

Their plan: to make their own cartoons. Their hope: to find enough outsource work to keep now-unemployed Disney animators in town until Project Firefly gets its big break.

Project Firefly has done subcontracting work on Disney direct-to-video projects, such as Pooh's Heffalump Halloween Movie and, in another bit of irony, Brother Bear 2, the sequel to the last cartoon Disney's Florida studio made. (Orlando's Mandy Moore is featured in a lead voice role.)

Those jobs helped Project Firefly build industry relationships and train in new kinds of animation. "When we do our own films and TV shows, all that will come in handy," Carola says.

A walk through their "bullpen" can give one Disney déjà vu. Not only are the desks and much of the gear Disney castoffs (Project Firefly bought much Disney animation ware at auction), so are the employees. Ex-Disney animator Travis Blaise works on a computer-animated piece. Artistic coordinator Pam Darley also came from Disney. There's Seung Kim, the digital modeler, a veteran of Disney and the animated Batman TV series, checking the look of a sequence.

George's producers would send out "maquettes" (models and model sheets showing how to draw a character), storyboards and scripted scenes to animate. During the course of 2005, Project Firefly turned those into finished sequences for Curious George.

The walls of Project Firefly's studios are papered with instructions -- how to draw George, and how not to. "Avoid background detail that distracts from the character," one cartoon is captioned, showing the monkey dangling from a ship's anchor. "Right": He's hanging in front of a plain black ship's hull. "Wrong": The hull is realistically cluttered with barnacles and sea scum. Too realistically.

"We worked on every aspect of production of George," says director of animation Gregg Azzopardi. "We helped in everything from original story planning to finished product."

As many as 69 people were on Project Firefly's payroll last year. If Project Firefly can get its own feature film developed for production, that number could swell.

Passion to create

The past year has been an uncertain one for animation, with DVD sales of The Incredibles not coming close to the Finding Nemo level. The scale of the hits (Madagascar, Chicken Little) has been reduced, and some 3-D animated projects (Valiant, Hoodwinked) underperformed. Have the "family film" cartoon makers at Project Firefly had any second thoughts about their gamble?

"We're actually encouraged, because the cost of some of the 3-D stuff, like Hoodwinked, has dropped," says creative director John Webber.

"The original passion of so many of us was the quality of the stories we could tell," says Carola. "That's still there."

In two years, Firefly has already doubled the amount of space it uses at Universal Studios' Florida backlot. Its animators are constantly training because they have to be up to speed on both 2-D animation and the newer 3-D (computer animation) and hybrids of the two, says Paulo Alvarado, director of story and development.

As they train, they create. Outsource work helps them pay the bills. But the thing that makes any start-up -- be it Pixar or Blue Sky (the studio that did Ice Age) -- is a big break. Project Firefly's could happen any day now. Firefly staffers have done a pilot based on their farm-animal super-hero short, Farm Force. If the animated TV series is picked up -- and it looks as if it might be -- it could mean Orlando will once again be where the hits are drawn.