

## FX EXPERTiSe has the world calling

'We're getting that critical mass of companies and talent . . . that can handle the bigger films'

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"If Image Engine was a woman, I'd leave my wife for her."

-- James Gunn, American writer-director of the horror film *Slither*

That quote has made the round of Image Engine, the Vancouver visual effects studio that created some of the images for the made-in-B.C. feature film. The fact is, a lot of people are happy with the FX work being done in this city, which appears on the brink of becoming a major visual effects centre.

Times are good for Vancouver's visual effects houses, who are working at maximum capacity, expanding as they go.

"We're busier than we've ever been," says Warren Franklin, who heads the visual effects division of Rainmaker, the city's largest effects studio, with 140 employees. "We're getting that critical mass of companies and talent in Vancouver that can handle the bigger films, whether they are shooting in Vancouver or not.

"A lot of the work we're doing right now did not shoot in Vancouver."

These projects include the Will Ferrell comedy *Blades of Glory*, shot in Los Angeles, and an unnamed U.S. feature that was shot in Mexico.

Rainmaker set up a London studio last year to work on 50 visual effects shots for the blockbuster *The Da Vinci Code*, which was shot in the U.K. and France. Rainmaker's U.K. division has 12 employees, but will expand to 30 or 40 over the next year.

"We're really positioned as a film community to become one of the top three or four centres for visual effects in the world," says Franklin of the Vancouver scene.

"We're extremely busy right now," says Adam Stern, founder of Vancouver's Artifex. "Across the board, things are up everywhere. Companies in town are working non-stop, and there are companies in the States looking at opening offices here.

"Vancouver has always been thought of as a production centre, but we have very quickly become recognized as a visual effects centre."

Stern began Artifex in 1997 with two other employees. The company now has 10 full-time staff, and uses a number of freelance artists. The company does effects for movies



CREDIT: Bill Keay, Vancouver Sun  
Artifex chief Adam Stern (seated) with company employees and posters from two movies that contain special effects created by the team.

(Pathfinder, Eve and the Fire Horse), TV movies (Wildfires) and series (Alice I Think).

Most of Artifex's work had been film and TV projects shot here, but like Rainmaker, it now gets visual effects contracts for productions shot elsewhere. The company recently did effects for 7 Seconds, a Wesley Snipes feature for DVD which was shot in Europe.

Image Engine began in 1995 with four employees. Back then, says owner Robin Hackl, the company worked mainly on corporate graphics and advertising. But as more movies and TV series located here, the studios -- and MGM was the main client -- began trying the local post-production houses rather than ship the effects to Los Angeles.

"We were fortunate enough to be in on the ground floor of that trend," says Hackl, whose studio now has 36 employees and whose credits include features Blade: Trinity, I, Robot and Scooby Doo 2, and TV series Stargate SG-1 and Dead Like Me. "That's where a lot of our initial growth came from."

Vancouver's rates are comparable to those in Los Angeles. What makes the city a bargain are the exchange rate on the dollar and the fact that B.C. offers a major tax credit for visual effects work. The digital animation-digital effects credit gives producers a 15-per-cent tax break on Canadian labour costs.

Last month, Artifex and The Embassy, another Vancouver visual effects company, held a public event at the Vancity Theatre to show their work and answer questions from those interested in visual effects. The event sold out to a mixed audience of film industry professionals and students.

The visual effects program at Vancouver Institute of Media Arts (VanArts) reports that more than 80 per cent of the graduates of its one-year program have found work either in Vancouver or abroad.

Franklin compares what's happening in Vancouver to what occurred in London a decade ago. London once only had a handful of effects companies, and now has six or seven majors, a lot of smaller companies, and has more than 4,000 people in the industry.

Vancouver currently has 15 to 20 effects companies, employing 600 to 800 people.

"We're in a good position if we can continue to attract the right talent to Vancouver. We can bid on shows that are 500 or 600 shots," says Franklin.

Hackl agrees with the London analogy.

"This is a lot like what happened in the U.K.," says Hackl. "There was literally no activity out there, and a handful of companies popped their heads out of the sand and said, 'Hey, we're available.' The U.K. was offering good cost incentives with tax breaks, and motion picture companies responded."

"What's really critical," Franklin says, "is to get enough companies and enough work that you can attract talent to Vancouver, maybe get some of the Canadians who relocated to the States because there wasn't enough of this work here. If you have a number of companies that are successful, then it's less risky for someone to move to Vancouver to work."

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