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Will Disney's Meet the Robinsons Have a Bright Future?

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A Warm and Fuzzy Future World

The team behind the new CG-animated feature *Meet the Robinsons* discuss Disney's latest time-traveling adventure.
by Jake Friedman



futuristic city. "We looked at industrial designers who defined the look of streamlined moderne, like from the World's Fair of '39. It was more aeronautical than art deco, back when people were visualizing a grand future with amazing technology and flying cars. We just made that into a reality." Ruppel was inspired by artists like Raymond Loewy, Henry Dreyfuss and Harold Van Doren, as well as cinema-



tographers Vittorio Storaro and Caleb Dechanel, not to mention the artistic collaboration from author/illustrator William Joyce himself.

"I made compilation sheets of reference that included images of eye-popping Technicolor, old popular mechanics magazines, old movies," says Joyce, who

Move over, Flintstones and Jetsons. This spring, a new animated family will fight for the hearts of audiences around the world. (Well, that's until Fox's *The Simpsons Movie* takes over in July!) The ambitious and visually stunning CG pic from Disney Feature Animation, *Meet the Robinsons*, hopes to be more than just another computer-animated film to clog up the box office.

From conception throughout execution, the filmmakers pulled out every stop to make its cohesive story erupt from the imaginative sources in a way that stands out in a crowded field. Based on William Joyce's acclaimed children's book, *A Day with Wilbur Robinson*, the film takes the audience on a time-traveling quest with a fantastical family into alternate futures where anything can and does happen.

"What's really unique about the movie is the cast of characters—that's the thing that I'm the most excited about," says director Steve Anderson, who has been on the project since late 2002. "They're very human, they have vulnerabilities, they have hopes and dreams that I think you really care about and you latch onto these characters for those things. Even the villain is very human, and I'm really

looking forward to seeing how people respond to these characters, and I hope they fall in love with them as much as I have."

The plot revolves around Lewis, an orphan boy genius/inventor who decides to uncover the identity of his parents. He is taken to a streamlined, utopian future by the time-traveling Wilbur Robinson to uncover his past and outsmart the sinister Bowler Hat Guy, all the while encountering numerous memorable friends along the way. To create this fantasy, it took Disney's Burbank studio more than four years and about 200 artisans, including art director Robh Ruppel (*Mulan*, *Treasure Planet*, *Brother Bear*), to see this project out to its completion.

"We started out with inspirational boards and did a ton of research, and because I was actually trained as an industrial designer, I know a lot of stuff first hand," says Ruppel, who led the teams to design everything in the film from the wardrobes, to the lighting, to the dazzling

The Bad and the Beautiful: After seeing the first cut of the movie, John Lasseter offered several suggestions to make the pic a stronger experience for the audience. As a result, the hero's journey has a darker emotional impact and the villain (The Bowler Hat Guy) is a more sinister character.



William Joyce



Steve Anderson

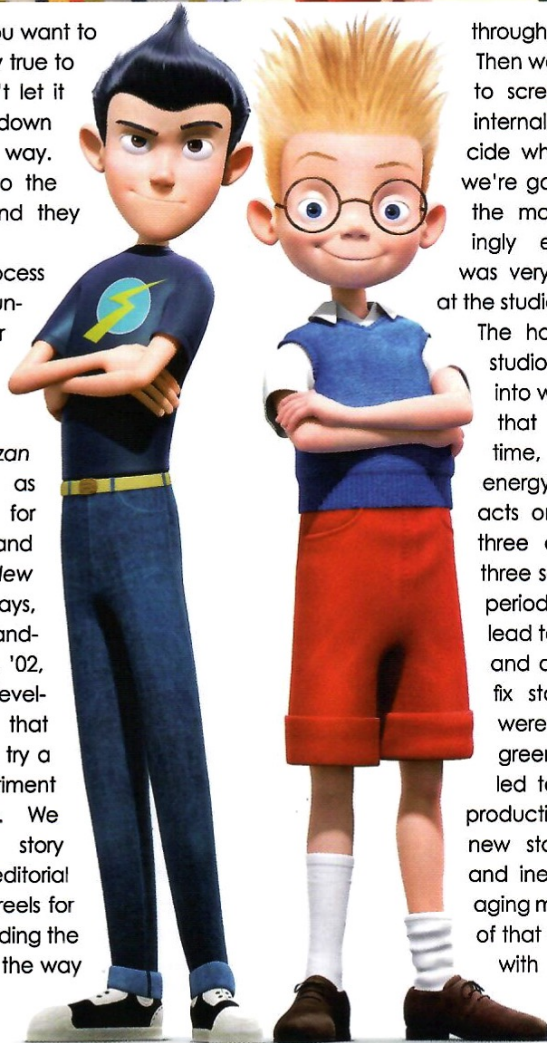


Robh Ruppel

worked closely on the production as executive producer. Besides writing and illustrating a half-dozen children's books, Joyce created Playhouse Disney's *Rolie Polie Olie*, PBS's *George Shrinks* and had been a character designer at Pixar before *Meet the Robinsons* started production. He also produced and did character design for Fox's 2005 hit feature, *Robots*. Throughout the process, Joyce would submit drawings, art samples and story ideas from his home in Louisiana to the staff in Burbank. "Early on, there were story points in the movie that appeared too purposefully to be straight out of the book," he says. "And I said, 'The book's a lark; the movie should be a lark. I ap-

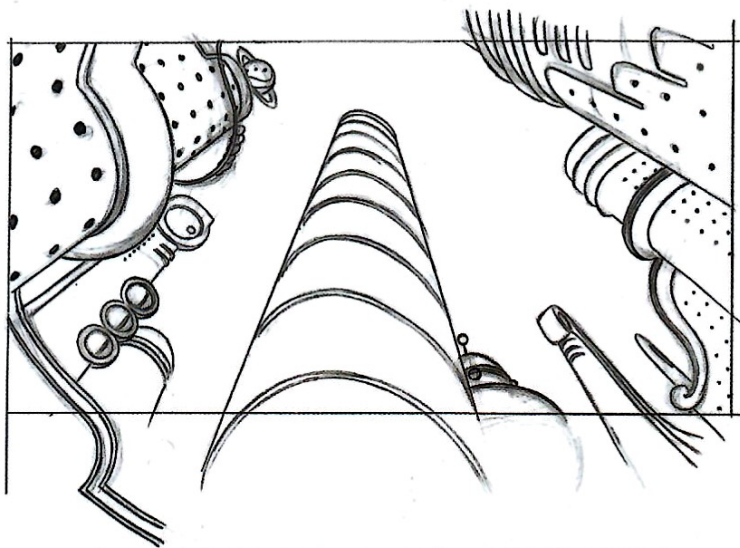
preciate that you want to stay so perfectly true to things, but don't let it weigh things down and get in the way. Just stay true to the spirit of it.' And they did."

The story process for the film was unconventional for Anderson, who had started at Disney in 1995 with *Tarzan* and worked as head of story for *Brother Bear* and *The Emperor's New Groove*. He says, "When I was handed the script in '02, our head of development said that they wanted to try a different experiment with this movie. We assembled a story crew and an editorial crew and built reels for this movie, boarding the entire movie all the way

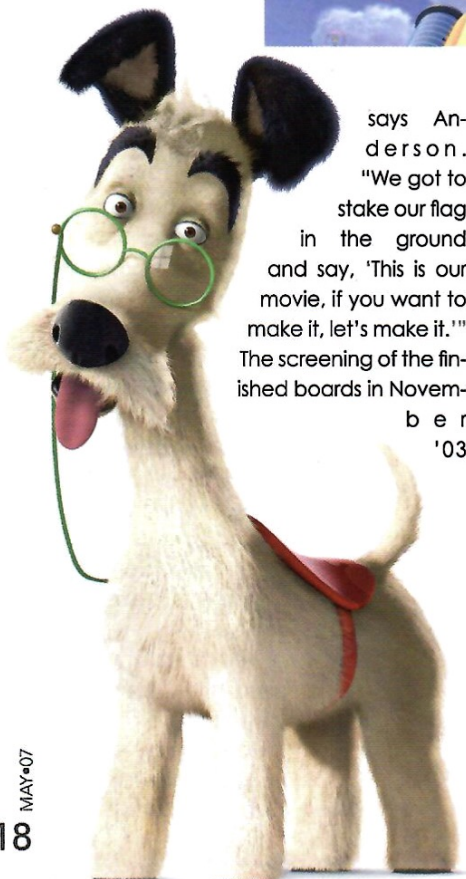


through from A to Z. Then we were going to screen the reels internally and decide whether or not we're going to make the movie. Amazingly enough, this was very unheard of at the studio."

The habit that the studio had fallen into was a process that took more time, money and energy. Boarding acts one, two and three of a film at three separate time periods would often lead to going back and attempting to fix story bits that were already green-lit, which led to holding up production, creating new story problems and inevitably damaging morale. "None of that was the case with this movie,"



Building Tomorrowland: Meet the *Robinsons'* production designer Robh Ruppel has been inspired by William Joyce's creative vision of a future that is also a throwback to a kinder, gentler portrait of everytown, U.S.A.—sort of like *Oliver Twist* meets *The Jetsons* in Mayberry.



says Anderson. "We got to stake our flag in the ground and say, 'This is our movie, if you want to make it, let's make it.'" The screening of the finished boards in November '03

was met with overwhelming praise. According to a revealing story in *The New York Times*, Anderson got extensive notes from Disney's Animation chief creative officer and Pixar co-founder John Lasseter last March during a grueling six-hour meeting. Lasseter suggested to make the villain scarier, and as a result, 60 percent of the original film was cut and an evil sidekick was added. In the final version of the film, our orphan's adventures have a more emotional kick to them. "The audience is going to be sobbing," Lasseter says in the piece. "It is really going to get them." It was decided that the project was going to be CG-animated before Anderson or Ruppel were brought onto the project. "There was no motion-capture at all, which I think made everything look much more alive," asserts Ruppel. "Even though some of the characters' movements are broad and sometimes very quick, it's much more believable, I think, than a motion-capture performance." Proprietary ani-

mation tools within Maya were used to create the character animation, and a proprietary piece of software called Paint 3D was used for texture-painting. All of the 2D digital painting was done in Photoshop. Adds Anderson, "I think when you're watching it you forget you're watching a computer-animated movie. I'm amazed at the amount of warmth, heart and character that you could get in 3D." "It's so sweet and gigantic and joyful like those old motion pictures were, but without being treacly," Joyce promises. "It just puts you in a good mood. You feel like you've had a grand ol' time at the movies." ■ **Jake Friedman is a New York-based writer and animator. You can visit him online at jakefriedman.net.**

Disney's *Meet the Robinsons* is now playing in theaters across U.S. and Europe. It will have a slow roll-out in various other territories through the summer.