



Entertainment

Meet the Robinsons is Disney's first "start to finish" full 3-D animation.
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Filling in the details

By LOUIS B. PARKS
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For Lewis, the animated star of Disney's *Meet the Robinsons*, childhood memories are not so good. His orphanage-school was one long disaster.

Youth was sunnier for Disney art director Robh Ruppel. He grew up in Bellaire with parents who supported his artistic dreams by sending him to Houston's High School for the Performing and Visual Arts.

The large, black, chauffeured SUV had hardly pulled into the HSPVA parking lot in the Montrose area a few days ago before Ruppel was out and into the school, exploring. As with many adults returning to their high school 25 years later, Ruppel's memories were strong.

"That time in your life is imprinted on you," said the 43-year-old Ruppel. "It seems like no time has passed. Junior high and high school are so formative."

Disney brought Ruppel and other *Meet the Robinsons* creators on a Houston tour for the film, the studio's first "start to finish" full 3-D animation. As art director for an animated film, especially in 3-D, Ruppel played an essential role in creating the different "worlds" Lewis visits through time travel.

Walking the HSPVA halls with principal Herbert Karpicke, Ruppel went right to his old locker — the right area anyway. He recalled classes and teachers who had been the most help. And the time his radio class figured out all the school's speakers were wired in a series.

"You broadcast through one, it goes through all of them," he said. "We managed to put on a local radio show through the whole school."

Aside from his pride in that accomplishment, Ruppel said high school made all the difference toward his future career.

"Now film has become more of a career choice. When I was a kid, it was not that accessible. The ability to spend three years doing that in high school made a difference for me. If I hadn't, I probably wouldn't be doing it now."

He spent most of his out-of-school hours in preparation of another kind, seeing old films at Rice Media Center and at the River Oaks Theatre back when it showed repertory classics.

"If you wanted to see *The Maltese Falcon*, you had to see it on the screen, on film," he says of the days before video. "I remember seeing *Citizen Kane* at Rice Media Center for the very first time. Seeing a film on screen is very different from seeing it on DVD. I thought, wow, this is what film is about."

Skills Ruppel started learning at HSPVA are all on screen in *Meet the Robinsons*, though he hopes most viewers never give them a thought. Like the art director on a live-action film, his job is to give the movie a look to support the story.

"Everything I do reinforces the story," he said. "My most important job is to make sure everything we're seeing is sending the same message. The colors we pick, the way we light things.

"When Lewis goes up to the rooftop (of the orphanage) feeling sad because he's not going to get adopted, my job is to say, 'OK, how can I get this same feeling with the time of day we pick, the color palate? It's a little blue, a little sad, a little moody. How dirty is the roof, what texture is it, what color is it?'

"Lewis feels stuck, so we do everything we can visually to say the same thing with images and pictures. We compose him in such a way that he's boxed in."

When the movie is in present day, while Lewis is in the orphanage, everything is dark and dull and the shapes are all angular, tight. After he rides a time-travel car into a happier future, the shapes tend to be rounded, we see the sky more, the colors are lighter and stronger.

All part of the art director's job.

The night after the HSPVA visit, Ruppel took his parents, Roger and Judy Ruppel, to a screening of the film at the Grand Palace theater, where he introduced the movie to the audience.

"They were so delighted by it," he said the next day. "They really liked the 3-D. My dad's an architect so he understands the principles, I just use different tools. Luckily I don't have to worry about any building codes."

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