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INSPIRATIONS

DreamWorks lead technical director Allen Stetson reveals how a chance viewing of *The Little Mermaid* kick-started a career in animation



MY SEVENTH-GRADE CONCERT

band teacher was out sick one day, and his substitute teacher knew nothing about music. To keep us placated for the hour-long class, she showed *The Little Mermaid* on VHS

The opening sequence really hooked me. (No pun intended). When the lucky fish who escapes the fisherman's grasp swims by the screen, distorting the image, I remember pausing and thinking, "Wait a minute - this is hand-drawn... How did they draw that distortion?"

Although I didn't know the word 'caustics' in seventh grade, I knew that it was a unique property of light, and I just couldn't imagine how an artist would draw light. How can you create luminance with a pencil? It was like watching a magic show, and I wanted to see what went on back-stage.

My interest in model trains (essentially creating little worlds of my own) translated well into the emerging 3D animation technology, and really set the stage for my love of animation when I started almost a decade ago. I suppose that if the magic behind *Ghostbusters* or

some other live-action film had grabbed my attention in a similar manner, I might be in live-action today. But it was animation from the start: the illusion of movement achieved with seemingly ordinary household items: pencil, paper, paint and, in today's age, a computer.

I have since had the pleasure of working with at least 10 of the artists on that film. I make no secret of that film's influence on my career: I have a picture of Ariel that has decorated my office for every one of my eight years in the animation industry.

My technical direction role at DreamWorks acts in perfect harmony with my goals of educating and co-ordinating: I assist fantastic artists to go on and become part of the exciting stereoscopic revolution and, building upon the principles that classic films like *The Little Mermaid* taught us, we will go on to create a new cinematic language.

Allen Stetson studied at Cogswell College before landing a technical director role at DreamWorks. Credits include *Flushed Away* and *Kung Fu Panda* www.dreamworksanimation.com

• *The Little Mermaid* was a highly successful Disney animated feature. Based on Hans Christian Andersen's fairy tale, the 1989 original had two direct-to-video follow ups, *Return to the Sea* in 2000 and *Ariel's Beginning* in 2008



SEE FOR YOURSELF Disney's *The Little Mermaid* saw the release of a two-disc special edition DVD in 2006, including a making-of and other features detailing the effects and animation behind the film www.amazon.com