

# Local Oscar winner blames studios for loss of job

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go to the party. It was just too bittersweet,” said Machado (nee Morrow), who also won an Oscar for visual effects in the 2007 fantasy-adventure film *The Golden Compass*.

“I did watch the Academy Awards at home and popped a bottle of champagne when our award was presented. *Life of Pi* is by far the best film I’ve been involved with and I’m so happy to have been a part of that, but it’s really sad at the same time, what’s happened to Rhythm & Hues.”

Even the presentation of the Oscar to R&H’s visual effects supervisor Bill Westenhofer was like something out of a professional wrestling script. His acceptance speech was cut off by the theme music to *Jaws* when he was just about to lament the state of the industry in Hollywood, and then *Life of Pi* director Ang Lee didn’t bother to acknowledge the company amongst his thank yous, despite being responsible for producing about 90 per cent of the visual effects for the film.

Machado noted that at one stage R&H had an “incredible” benefits package, which included employees being encouraged to bring their pets to the office every day, catered lunches and dinners, yearly allowances for plastic surgery and non-film-related educational courses, as well as company-covered car washes while they worked.

Although R&H maintains studios in Taiwan, Vancouver, India and Malaysia, its Hollywood studio has been slated for auction in bankruptcy court on March 28 while a skeleton staff of employees continues to work on two films set for release this summer, *R.I.P.D.* and *Percy Jackson: Sea of Monsters*.

“I lost my job and that in itself is devastating, but this is like a family breakup, or a divorce. Some of my best friends worked there,” she said tearfully.

“(Rhythm & Hues owner) John Hughes’s goal was to make money, but he did more than any boss I know of to keep us happy, from day one. I’ll probably find another job but it will never be the same. I do have a lot of contracts in the industry. I’m a positive person and things happen for a reason. When one door closes, another one opens.”

Because Rhythm & Hues was not owned by one of the major movie-makers in Hollywood and isn’t unionized, the company was hired on a freelance basis. A contract is agreed upon before a movie goes to production, but often alterations are made during the filmmaking process that force the visual effects firms to devote a huge amount of resources and labour that was also being undercut by less expensive foreign labour.

“There were several reasons for the bankruptcy, some of them were Rhythm & Hues’s fault, but most of them are because of the movie studios and the demands they make of us,” added Machado, who spent

nine months working on the computer-generated model for O.J., the Orangutan character in *Life of Pi*.

“The studios think it’s okay to keep making changes while shooting is going on, like rewriting the ending or changing characters altogether, and that happens on a regular basis. At that point, we might be halfway done our work for the movie and we have to do everything over, with no consideration for the extra work that we’ve had to do.”

Machado was a look/development director for colour and lighting with R&H at the time of her departure, but didn’t set out to be in the visual effects field upon graduating from Georgetown District High School.



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She majored in math and sciences at the University of Waterloo with a passion for art. In her second year at Waterloo, while watching a CBC documentary in the mid-1980s on the then-cutting-edge computer graphics required for the making of the movie *Tron*, Machado found her calling.



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“It was literally like a light bulb going off in my head: Computers and art. That’s what I’d always wanted to do in the back of my mind when I started school,” she said.

“I got into the Computer Animation course at Sheridan College and it was exactly what I’d been looking for. It was really cool to learn and work with people who have now become some of the pioneers in the visual effects industry.”

Prior to joining R&H, Machado, who is single with no children, worked in Toronto for eight years before moving to Hollywood. Her first big project with Rhythm & Hues was the polar bear TV commercials for Coca-Cola and her name can be found in the credits of noteworthy films such as *Babe: Pig In the City*, *Cats & Dogs*, *X-Men*

2, *Garfield*, *Alvin and the Chipmunks* and most recently 2012’s *Snow White and the Huntsmen*.

R&H is considered to be at the forefront of creating computer-generated animals for the silver screen, so it’s not surprising that Machado is an avid dog-lover; for many years breeding and exhibiting smooth fox terriers at her Bellewoods’ kennel. Some of the dogs she has bred have gone on to show at the prestigious Westminster Kennel Club event in New York.

“My dogs assisted me in *The Golden Compass*, where you start with a static

image that’s not moving, and I animate it (on a high-end Intel processor) with fur and skin, looking at the pattern of the dog fur as a guide,” she said.

“The dogs actually keep me sane. You really need another hobby or other interests in this line of work or you’ll burn out. You’re working with incredibly talented people and a lot of them are musicians and artists away from the studio, so it’s been really inspiring to work with them.”

Machado’s mother, Jo Morrow, resides in Georgetown and will turn 80 in May. Father Gerry passed away in 2011 and sister Brenda lives in Burlington.

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