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Chris Schouten Jr.

Cartoonist's work hits the big screen in Anastasia

First 20th Century Fox full-length animation feature film

By **STEVE LeBLANC**
Special to *The Champion*

Millions of North Americans will jam their way into movie theatres this fall to see 20th Century Fox's first-ever full length animated feature, *Anastasia*.

For most, the two-hour sojourn will provide excitement, intrigue and general entertainment. For Milton native Chris Schouten Jr., however, it will provide an opportunity to catch up with old friends — ones he helped create.

The cook turned commercial artist is one of the principal designers of the \$70 million flick due to hit the big screen November 21.

Mr. Schouten has worked on nothing else for the past 22 months since being hired by 20th Century Fox Animation Studios in Phoenix, Arizona.

The new division of the movie-making giant is the first to rival Disney for bragging rights and financial gain in the animated film industry. Hot on their heels are Warner Brothers and Steven Spielberg's *DreamWorks*.

"The race is on to see who's going to dethrone Disney," said Mr. Schouten, a graduate of Milton District High School.

With his work on *Anastasia* now finished, he's currently on hiatus and visiting his parents in town.

As a story board artist and character designer, Mr. Schouten had a big hand in deciding the look and feel of *Anastasia*. He worked alongside industry icon Don Bluth to bring both the key and secondary characters to life.

"Don had conceptualized the main characters before production began. They were created by him and polished by me. Many of the incidental characters like Sophie, the Old Hag and Bartok the Albino Bat were my own original designs," he said.

Historical story line

Those characters — which have undergone several stages of evolution to attain perfection — surround a unique and somewhat historical story line.

Based on Russian folklore, *Anastasia* is a tale of the only surviving daughter of the Russian Czar whose family was killed by revolutionaries just prior to Communism.

"Our story is loosely based on this part of history. Telling a story completely on the revolution and communism would obviously be too depressing for our audience," Mr. Schouten pointed out.

The story follows heroine Anya's journeys and adventures as well as those of main characters Vladimir, Dimitri and the evil Rasputin.

Fox has a number of heavyweight movie stars lending their voices to these personalities including Kelsey Grammer, John Cusack and Meg Ryan.



The evil Rasputin will hit the big screen this fall in 20th Century Fox's *Anastasia*. He is one of the main characters Milton native Chris Schouten helped create.

"Don and I had to come up with four to six facial expressions for each character as well as design front, back and side views," Mr. Schouten explained, speaking with great enthusiasm about his work. "My role in the movie involved the pencil to paper design. Every scene was set up by me before it went to animation."

"I'd say there are close to 300 people working on *Anastasia*, who have done nothing else for almost two years."

Unlike his traditional role in animation, most of Mr. Schouten colleagues work on the more high-tech end of production — using computers for everything from coloring and movement to musical scoring.

Fox is even designing new programs to expand what their artists can make characters do.

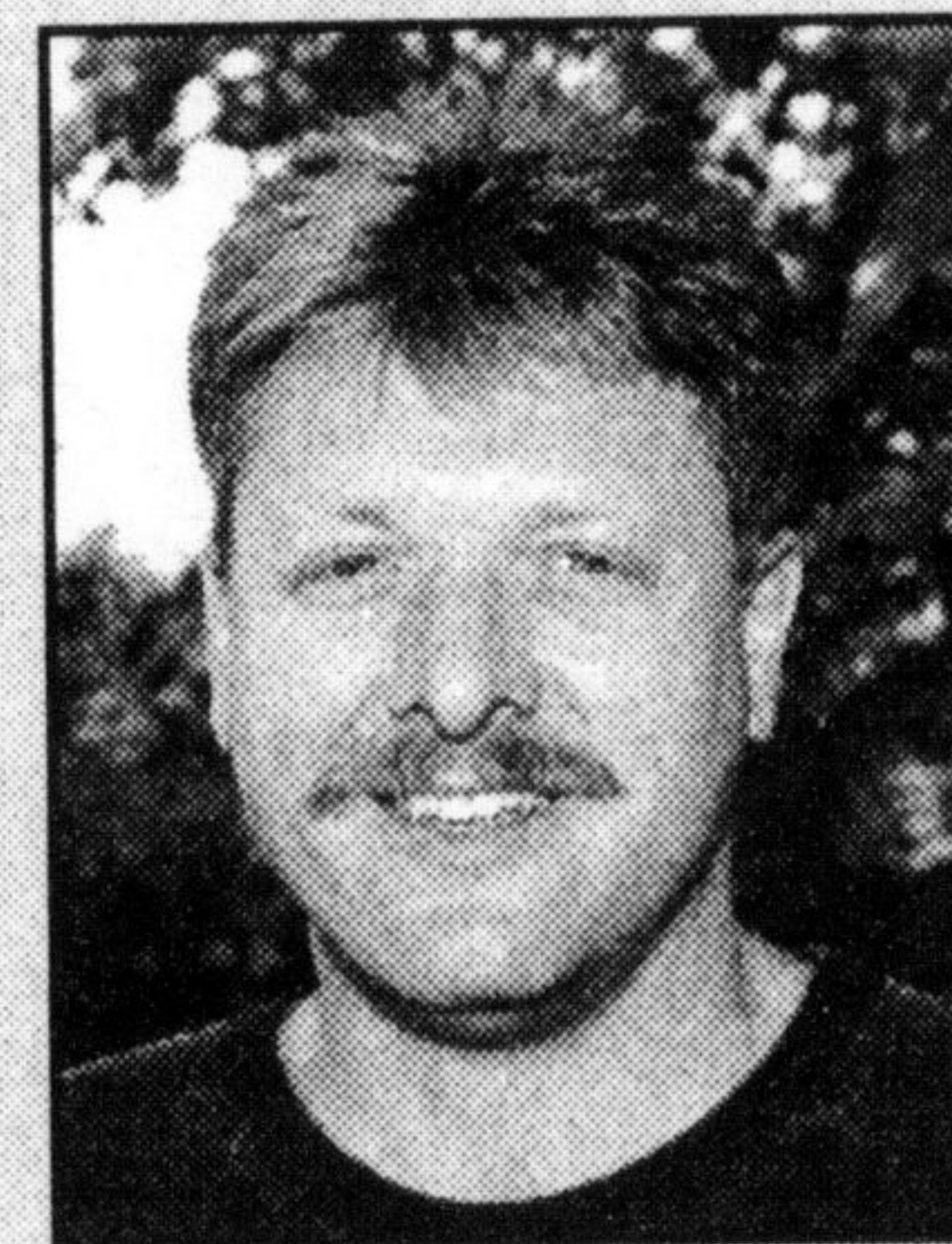
Sheridan graduate

While *Anastasia* is his first experience on a full-length feature production of this magnitude, Mr. Schouten is anything but a rookie in the world of animation.

In fact, there's little the 39-year-old artist hasn't done in his 18-year career. Lending his talents to both television and movies, he's

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CHRIS SHOUTEN JR.



worked consistently since graduating with high honours from Sheridan College's animation program — famous world-wide for producing industry leaders.

Hired immediately by Atkinson Film Arts in Ottawa, his first assignment involved an adaptation of the *Curious George* novels. It was years later in the nation's capital that he would meet his second wife Gail, also part of the industry.

It wasn't long before his profile skyrocketed with movies like *Heavy Metal* and TV programs such as *Inspector Gadget*, *Tales From The Crypt*, *Alvin and the Chipmunks* and *Denis the Menace*.

Perhaps his biggest assignment, prior to joining 20th Century Fox, came overseas in Tokyo, Japan where he put a new spin on a certain capped crusader in *Batman, The Animated Series*.

Even his lesser viewed projects have gained the respect of his movie-making peers. In 1987 he won two separate industry awards for his work on the television series *Tin Soldier*.

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Former Fifth Wheel cook

While he's made a direct beeline to success since attending Sheridan, Mr. Schouten said he more or less stumbled into animation after high school. "I was working full time as a cook at the Fifth Wheel. One morning after a very long night shift I burned my hand and decided I wanted to do something else."

"Having always been interested in drawing, I applied to Sheridan's illustration program. The course was full, but there were spaces still open in animation. I haven't looked back since."

Mr. Schouten said an animator must be "an actor with a pencil or computer." A sense of story-telling, he said, is almost as essential as drawing skill in order to make the characters believable to the audience.

At least one member of that prospective audience that's been won over is Mr. Schouten's five-year-old son Curtis who has had plenty of sneak peaks at *Anastasia* and offered plenty of enthusiasm for 20th Century Fox executives.

"From what I've seen from Curtis, I think we've got a success on our hands. He's laughing and showing excitement in all the right places."

"I'm really anxious to see what the critics say and to get audience response," he said.



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