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Right fit: Rhinofx, Matin size up 3-D Lugz spot

NEW YORK — Manhattan is known for many things, but being the birthplace of cute and cuddly computer-animated characters isn't one of them.

When it comes to such 3-D little folk as Nemo, Shrek and Stuart Little, the city that never sleeps has historically taken a back seat to its more prolific West Coast cousins, including Pixar Animation Studios, PDI/DreamWorks and Sony Pictures Imageworks.

Of course, upstate New York's Blue Sky Studios created the quirky 3-D characters in 20th Century Fox's "Ice Age." But that animated film appears to draw more inspiration from the wacky cartoons of Hollywood's Warner



Bros. Pictures than it does the serene artists of the Hudson River School.

So why hasn't the Big Apple contributed more local flavor and style to the CG character pie?

"New York isn't a cheesy, upbeat town," says Kurt Teske, a Manhattan-

"Shadow Play," a Rhinofx spot for Lugz

based 3-D commercial producer. "And California has more resources."

Which is exactly why Teske and Rhinofx, a commercial studio located in midtown Manhattan, leapt at the chance to produce a fully CG-animated commercial for Lugz Shoes. But rather than emulate its more cloying left coast associates, Rhino hoped to prove Gotham's 3-D mettle by drawing lighting references from film noir, frame compositions from Japanese anime and the moody lighting scenarios associated with urban settings.

Consequently, Lugz's "Shadow Play," directed by Rhino's Arman Matin, is a 30-second spot starring a formidable 100-foot-tall black superhero. Based on real-life shoe spokesman and local Hot 97 DJ Funkmaster Flex, the mix maestro supernaturally levitates customized cars in a Harlem parking lot while wearing the latest Lugz footwear.

"We wanted to create a look that's intrinsically East Coast," Teske says. "We saw it as an opportunity to extend these ideas of urban hip-hop into the realm of 3-D."

Matin and his 20-person crew had eight weeks to research, develop, conceive a scenario, build a believable 3-D superhero that resembles Flex and then light, compose and churn out 22 different shots, each made from 12 complex layers of CG elements built in Alias|Wavefront's Maya.

Some of those animated layers, composited together in Adobe After Effects, include atmospheric light trails; some feature 2-D vehicles with shiny chrome rims and custom leather, and others include authentic illustrative notes that one could only find on New York's city streets.

Matin admits that given the limited budget and condensed schedule, he and the Rhino crew had to work nonstop to meet their deadline. Meanwhile, Teske kept equipment and crew on hold in the event of a crisis.

"There was a tremendous amount of personal interest for everybody," Matin says. "We all know the Lugz ad campaign, a lot of people listen to hip-hop here. I even got a written letter from one of the artists requesting that he get put on the job."

Despite the success of the spot — regarded in some circles as a "cut-through" advertisement, meaning it doesn't quite look like anything else on air and is a defining look for the brand — neither Teske nor Matin think Rhinofx would actively seek to do it again because of the campaign's financial and time constraints.

"It was a very special one-time opportunity," Teske says. "Usually, we make the bread rolls or the vegetable medley, but this was a chance to make the lobster thermidor."

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