

GVFX

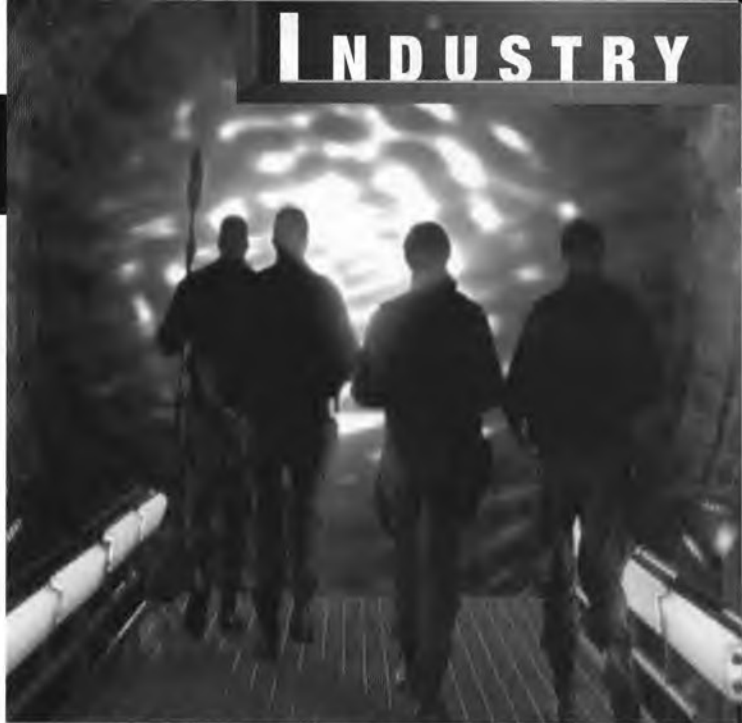
A Homegrown FX Success Story

By Mark Peranson

In a converted warehouse in Toronto's east end, spaceships hang from the ceiling, movie posters adorn the wall, and a mess of expensive computers consume more electricity than a small Eastern European country. The office of multiple-Gemini and Emmy-nominated boutique GVFX (formerly Gajdecki Visual Effects) could be the childhood bedroom of its friendly and enthusiastic founder, John Gajdecki.

Born in Ottawa in 1962 with a severe stutter that's since vanished, Gajdecki's insular childhood was spent building models with his brother Rick (who now runs the GVFX model shop) and taking pictures. Like many techies maturing in the mid-1970s, he was attracted to film FX by a little thing called *Star Wars*. "There was a drive-in near my house and I used to sneak in and watch from the back then go up front for the final battle sequence." Gajdecki worked summers at the National Archives, then, up the street, on the popular animated series *The Raccoons* as a matcher. "I made sure that when Burt went behind a tree, he went precisely behind a tree." From 1982 to 1986 he attended Toronto's York University where he studied filmmaking. His classmates included noted cinematographer Paul Sarossy (*The Sweet Hereafter*) and director Bronwyn Hughes. A York connection got him into the effects shop for Paramount's *Friday the 13th: The Series* and he soon was cosupervising the effects on another U.S. cable series, *War of the Worlds*. Working 16-hour days for three holiday-less years taught Gajdecki some lessons. "The effects industry has a massive level of fanaticism and you can get people working huge hours. That's not good because as a facility owner you need people to sleep or they'll be useless. At GVFX, we 'hot bunk' and each machine has two people on alternating shifts."

While with Paramount, Gajdecki saw changes were afoot in the industry. "I had a belief that special effects could be used for things other than sci-fi stories. Watching the movie *Speed* convinced me that the industry was going to be bigger than anybody thought." When *Friday the 13th* and *War of the Worlds* wrapped, Gajdecki bought back the gear he built—video and film rotoscope projectors allowing for speedy animation turnaround—and in the spring of 1991 Gajdecki Visual Effects was born. One of Canada's first effects boutiques, it offered visual effects without a postproduction lab. However, after securing a contract with YTV's *Dracula* a recession hit and for six lazy months Gajdecki and associates (including Tom Turnbull, Gemini-winner on *The Arrow*) designed a motion-control system while waiting for business to pick up. In 1993, deep in debt, Gajdecki was about ready to take a vacation and leave the business behind when Warner Bros. came calling with the series, *Kung Fu*. "*Friday the 13th* got us set up," he says, "and *Dracula* gave us a place in the industry, but it was *Kung Fu* that really got us started. I haven't had that holiday for six years now." After the success of *Kung Fu*, GVFX picked up the contract for William Shatner's *TekWar*, a major computer-based FX project which led



Stargate SG-1: The FX industry is changing the way movies and television shows are being made.

to international exposure. A second branch of the company opened in Vancouver in 1998.

Two-thirds of GVFX's work is done for television, and Gajdecki's clients now include *Stargate SG-1*, *The Outer Limits*, *Total Recall: The Series* and the CBS movie, *Joan of Arc*. In the world of feature filmmaking, the project that has garnered the most attention for the company is Universal's 1998 horror hit, *Bride of Chucky*. Gajdecki's association with the Hong Kong-heavy *Chucky* crew (director Ronny Yu and cinematographer Peter Pau) began with *Warriors of Virtue*, an effects-heavy film that was overshadowed on its release by the megahit *Twister*. L.A. ringer Mike Muscal supervised *Bride of Chucky*, but GVFX was the lead effects house. Its work on the bathtub electrocution scene highlighted a company strength, arcing, an effect seen when figures are hit by electricity. "There is software that creates arcing," Gajdecki says, "but it's pretty lifeless. We worked very carefully, painting attractive light and colour and correcting the background to make sure the animation we added was part of the original scene." *Chucky's* success created an itch that Gajdecki is anxious to scratch. "It's fun to work on bigger movies where you can afford to do things just right."

When he isn't living everyone's dream of blowing up Mike Bullard's head on television, Gajdecki ensures that five to 10 per cent of GVFX is set aside for homegrown productions. Future Canadian projects include Shaftsbury Films' soon-to-released version of Mordecai Richler's *Jacob Two Two Meets the Hooded Fang*, starring Miranda Richardson and Gary Busey. And as part of Gajdecki's commitment to higher education, GVFX has also endowed a scholarship for a fourth-year York University student. As he bids on other high-profile projects, Gajdecki is working on the company's Web site (www.gvfx.com). This takes time, as he works to ensure that all employees have a say in their future. "Special effects are now a pivotal part of virtually every production. The industry is changing the way movies are being made." In Canada, so is John Gajdecki. ●