

Image courtesy of YTV

# XCALIBUR

## A NEW TAKE ON AN OLD TALE

BY PAUL TOWNEND

*Xcalibur*. It evokes images of Arthurian legend, Camelot and the Knights of the Round Table. Excalibur was the sacred sword buried deep in a rock that only the true king could draw free. That king was the young boy Arthur, who grew to rule Camelot, the first among equals in the time when spirits, dragons and wizards walked in harmony with mankind.

*Xcalibur* 2001, however, evokes the images of *Laura Croft: Tomb Raider* and *Xena: Warrior Princess*. There is precious little Arthurian legend to be found in this latest foray in CGI animation for the preteen set. (The tweenies, as they are referred to in marketing circles – those eight- to 12-year-olds who haven't yet been exposed to the overwhelming selling power of music videos.) Produced by TVA International of Montreal and Ellipsanime of France, *Xcalibur* is a newly minted half-hour series that debuts this fall on YTV.

"Within the past 10 years this (CGI animation) has become a new industry," says series co-producer Dominique Mendel speaking from her office in Montreal. "It's something that is found in video games and computer games, so the kids like it. The pacing of the show has to be more dynamic. It's edited for kids and blended with sensitivity for that age. It's a saga based on the Arthurian myths with a modern twist." That twist being a strong female lead who holds onto the magic sword until Arthus, the young king, can come of age and wield its power wisely.

"It's a fabulous story for the older kids, and younger kids may enjoy it too," says Bonita Siegel, manager of development and production for Corus's Entertainment's children's division. Corus owns YTV. "Our target is the tween audience and its very much in keeping with the interest of children today in medieval times and heroic stories. They demand high-quality graphics, and that's what they are going to get with *Xcalibur*. I think the mixture of the old and new is very important because the characters are living in



the legendary past, but they still have a modern look about them and a modern attitude."

The series is based on an original concept by writer Benjamin Legrand and designed by renowned French strip cartoonist Philippe Druillet, whose work can be found in the pages of the more adult-oriented *Heavy Metal* magazine. It is directed by Didier Pourcel, also from France, and overseen in Canada by supervising director Alan Best, using the very latest in 3-D computer-animation techniques, including motion-capture technology and Maya software to create movements and skin tones that are exceptionally realistic looking. "MoCap, or motion capture, is captured by optical points on a real body while the person initiates the movement of the character in the show," explains Mandel. "*Xcalibur* is a show that is very realistic, and we wanted the best movement possible, so that is why we used motion-capture technology, even with horses."

The first three episodes of *Xcalibur* aired on YTV in March of this year and the story goes something like this. The comely young princess Djana, along with handsome Herik, an apprentice magician, Wip, a fire-breathing miniature dragon, and Tara, the free-spirited barbarian babe, fight the evil sorcerer, a floating demon known as Kwodahn. He has turned Djana's father into stone and his evil powers are spreading through the land like a virus. To free her father and dispose of Kwodahn, Djana must prove herself to the boy King Arthus. Good at heart, this young king is misguided by his evil uncle Ragan, a deceitful minion of Kwodahn who had the boy's father killed so he could rule in his place. Only when Djana has proven herself will she and *Xcalibur* be able to restore peace and justice to the land.

Much like *Reboot* from Mainframe (see story on page 24), there is a strong belief at YTV that *Xcalibur* will have a long shelf life. Produced with Maya and FilmBox software combined with key-frame animation, this allows for simulated camera moves that give a strong visual presence to the beautifully crafted designs by Druillet. The costumes and sets are striking and offer the strongest appeal to the series. "We took it because we thought it was special, not simply because it was CGI," says Siegel, "although *Reboot* has been very successful for us. We get offered CGI series all the time, but we thought *Xcalibur* was on a much higher level with a strong storyline and strong characters. It pays enormous attention to detail and the movement feels quite real." YTV initially ordered 13, but 26 are already in the works and TVA is planning a separate feature in 3-D animation tentatively titled *Axis*.

The *Xcalibur* series has been over three years in the making, originating with Motion International before it was absorbed by the TVA group of companies. The Quebec government made funding available to train local animators in CGI and now TVA has built up a highly skilled workforce. "I see the future in blended productions using conventional 2-D animation and this very advanced 3-D work," says Mendel. "YTV had creative approval and involvement all the way through the series's development," adds Siegel. "We're very proud of it and I think it is quite beautiful to watch. The kids will love it."

TAKE ONE

Princess Djana

