

## Why Disney wooed a crazy Canuck

**He never misses Coach's Corner. He's a huge Stompin' Tom fan. So when Walt Disney approached 'Spaz' Williams to helm its newest animated blockbuster, he insisted it be all-Canadian. As he prepares for the release of *The Wild*, Williams talks to GAYLE MacDONALD about Disney's leap of faith, his devotion to the Maple Leafs, and why he cast Don Cherry as a penguin**

By GAYLE MACDONALD

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When Walt Disney Co.'s lucrative distribution deal with 'toon darling Pixar ended in late 2002, the Mouse House went looking for talented, edgy animators with whom it could partner up.

It ended up on the doorstep of San Francisco-based Complete Pandemonium, a tiny firm whose eccentric creative brain is Toronto-born Steve (Spaz) Williams, a special-effects whiz who lives in the United States but remains a fervent -- some would say fanatical -- Toronto Maple Leafs / Don Cherry-loving Canadian.

Disney was specifically wooing Williams, a graduate of Oakville, Ont.'s Sheridan College, to direct *The Wild*, an \$80-million (U.S.) animated feature film about a madcap troupe of animals who run away from the zoo. At first, Williams waffled, unsure about working for a monolith of Walt's proportions.

But finally he accepted -- on one whopping condition. Williams wanted to team up with a Toronto-based special effects / animation house named CORE, co-founded 12 years ago by *Star Trek*'s William Shatner. The 44-year-old director also insisted that all the work be done by Canadian animators on their own turf: right in Hogtown.

Wanting him bad, Disney caved. And Williams, a rough-around-the-edges guy who always speaks his peace, started hiring. Before *The Wild* went into production, CORE employed 120 employees. Within the space of a few months, the company had expanded to 450 people, and moved to a much bigger shop -- from 25,000 square feet to three times that much in a converted warehouse on Toronto's high-creativity King Street West.

Now in postproduction and due to be released in theatres Good Friday, April 14, *The Wild* ranks as the largest animation production ever done in Canada. And Williams -- whose second hero after Cherry is Stompin' Tom Connors -- is damn proud of that.

"It really was a long time coming," says Williams, whose standard garb is a ratty T-shirt

(or Leafs jersey), combat boots and camouflage fatigues. "It's an all-Canadian talent doing it in Toronto instead of in some U.S. studio. We killed ourselves, we truly did. It was tough, because production -- on that size budget -- was difficult. Making a film of this quality for under \$80-million is a triumph, seeing as the majority of them, like *Chicken Little*, cost \$150-million.

"But it was also exciting, because I've always wanted to bring a film back to Toronto," says Williams, who apprenticed in his field at George Lucas's Industrial Light & Magic, and has since worked as chief animator and special-effects supervisor on such films as *Jurassic Park*, *Terminator 2: Judgment Day*, *The Abyss* and *The Mask*, for which he received an Academy Award nomination. He also created Blockbuster's popular hamster/guinea-pig commercials.

With the tax breaks and low Canadian dollar, it also made good financial sense for Disney to hire a Canadian shop. "Little did I know there'd be a goddamn hockey strike when I was back here," says the buzz-cut sporting Spaz, reached at his 20-acre farm in Marin County, Ca. "Of all my luck. Christ!"

*The Wild* is Williams's directorial debut, and it's reportedly almost as irreverent as the man himself. It follows the after-hours life of a group of animals at the New York Zoo. (Ask him about the fact it sounds a bit like a clone of Dreamworks's *Madagascar*, and Williams bristles -- "I saw the script of *The Wild* in 2001. I call *Madagascar* the short before the feature. There's quite a quality difference."

Not surprisingly, Williams's film also features some Canadian vocal talent, including Kiefer Sutherland, as the lion leader; Shatner, as a villainous wildebeest; and Cherry, as a penguin announcer (hardly a stretch there). "There was no way I was doing a film in Canada and not having Don Cherry in it," says Williams).

Other actors on board include Jim Belushi (a street-smart squirrel), Janeane Garofalo (a pampered giraffe), Richard Kind (a dim-witted anaconda) and Eddie Izzard (an acerbic koala who hates being called cute). Williams's 10-year-old daughter, Hannah, also has a voice role, as a little monkey girl.

The film took 2½ years to make, with most of the staff -- whose average age was 30 -- working 10 to 12 hours a day. "We were like a big family," says Williams of CORE headquarters, which seems to have as many dogs on the premises as people. "I've never hung out with executives, ever," sniffs Williams, whose producing partner in Complete Pandemonium is Clint Goldman, another Industrial Light & Magic alumnus. "As soon as we walked out the door, I wasn't the director any more. I was just another guy to hang out with, throw darts, and drink beer."

CORE president Bob Munroe said the Disney contract -- green-lit in February, 2003 -- bumped his company to a new level. "I like to think we always had the potential to be considered among one of the best animation/ effects and film-production studios in the world, but like many facilities, we had not gotten the opportunity to prove it," says

Munroe, 44. Prior to *The Wild*, CORE had done special effects for films such as *Resident Evil: Apocalypse* and *Doctor Dolittle*, and has animated such TV shows as *Angela Anaconda* and *Franny's Feet*.

"We went from playing in the very capable minor leagues directly into the major leagues," adds the executive, whose other partners are Shatner, John Mariella, Kyle Menzies and Ron Estey. Recently, CORE brought on a new minority partner, billionaire film producer Ted Field, whose Chicago family owns department store Marshall Field's.

"Steve wanted to bring this movie to Toronto because he's from here, all his friends are from here, and he wanted to give Canada the opportunity to prove it can compete on the world stage," adds Munroe, who met Williams 20 years ago when both were so-called demo jockeys (a.k.a. product specialists) working for competing computer-software-design firms.

"I've got to say, Disney -- which is constantly being accused of being anything but entrepreneurial and innovative -- took a fairly big leap of faith," says Munroe. "I don't think any other studio out of the States would have had the courage to do it."

That may be true, but Williams -- whose "Spaz" nickname originated with his computer log-on -- is quick to add that the joint venture was not always a walk in the park. "Make no mistake," says the straight talker. "This was a bastard production from the get-go -- a movie that had had several foster homes" and various incarnations going back as far as a decade. "It was called *The Big Break*, then *Wildlife*. Then Disney Animation stopped production on it. Then they gave it to Disney Live Action. And then they found me. The stakes were very high for us, and with the growing pains Disney was going through, a massive amount of focus came down on our film."

The irony also isn't lost on Williams that *The Wild* -- which came to him after Disney and Pixar parted ways -- is now about to be released just as the two animation giants have joined forces once again, in a \$7.4-billion deal. As far as the animation veteran is concerned, the remarriage is a good thing. "Pixar didn't own any of the library it had created, so it was essentially starting over again. Disney, for whatever reason, had lost its way in animation, and really needed the expertise of Pixar in this new frontier. Combined, they're going to create an arsenal of quality for audiences."

Now back on his Marin County farm, Williams is focusing for the time being on hobbies other than film-making. Obsessed with rebuilding large machinery, he recently put together an old Ford tractor, which he rides around his property. And he's excitedly awaiting the delivery of a 60-tonne British tank, an FV4201 to be precise, that he plans to reconstruct and then "drive around and crush things."

He also has spent countless hours wiring his forest with speakers. "I blast Porky Pig cartoons through the woods," he hastens to explain, "to scare the yuppie bikers" who whiz through the trails surrounding his quirky homestead.

And no matter how far away he may be, Williams remains in daily touch, via satellite, with his Canadian -- and Commonwealth -- brethren. "I have Bell ExpressVu, so I never miss *Coach's Corner*, or any Leafs game. And certainly never *Coronation Street*."