



Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine

Volume 14
Issue 2 *Summer 2005*

Article 2

2005

Fantasy Job

Jeffrey G. Hanna

Illinois Wesleyan University, iwumag@iwu.edu

Recommended Citation

Hanna, Jeffrey G. (2005) "Fantasy Job," *Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine*: Vol. 14: Iss. 2, Article 2.
Available at: <http://digitalcommons.iwu.edu/iwumag/vol14/iss2/2>

This is a PDF version of an article that originally appeared in the printed Illinois Wesleyan University Magazine, a quarterly periodical published by Illinois Wesleyan University. For more information, please contact iwumag@iwu.edu.

©Copyright is owned by the University and/or the author of this document.

Fantasy Job

Under the creative guidance of studio executive Bill Damaschke '85, movies such as *Shrek* and *Shark Tale* are setting box-office records and sparking a new golden age in film animation.

By Jeffery G. Hanna

Bill Damaschke '85 was mostly bored when he picked up the phone one day in 1994 and began dialing movie studio job hotlines.

He had been in Los Angeles for a few years, working as a temp and picking up acting jobs where he could — commercials, sitcoms, whatever he could find. Being an actor in L.A., he recalls, was quite different from being an actor in New York, where he landed immediately after graduating from Illinois Wesleyan.

Damaschke had moved to the West Coast on a whim, surprising even himself. “I was, at the time, a diehard New Yorker, thinking that I’d never leave,” he says.

But here he was in Los Angeles, and now he was thinking that maybe it was time to try something besides acting, just to see where it might lead.

One of the hotlines he called was at the Walt Disney Studio, where they were advertising for assistants in animation. Damaschke had always loved animation. Growing up, he tuned in to daily reruns of the original *Mickey Mouse Club*, which typically featured a short Disney cartoon. Damaschke owned a book about Walt Disney, which included a list of all of those cartoons. As he watched the show, he would carefully check off the cartoons he saw, making notes about them in the margins.



Damaschke (above) is responsible for the launch of all DreamWorks' animated movies into production. “I oversee the staffing of directors, producers, story artists, production designers — all the front end, top-level creative talent that comes onto the project to realize the film,” he explains. (Photo provided by DreamWorks)

His call to the Disney hotline led to interviews and, in turn, to a job as a production assistant on the animated hit *Pocahontas*, which was in the final stages of production prior to its 1995 release.

Damaschke had been working at Disney for 10 months when a new opportunity arose at DreamWorks, a studio launched by Steven Spielberg, Jeffrey Katzenberg, and David Geffen in 1994. He was hired as coordinator in the production office on *The Prince of Egypt*, DreamWorks' first animated feature. By the time that movie was released in 1998, Damaschke had moved up several levels to production manager.

And that, in 350 words or less, is how Bill Damaschke got here, which is his second-floor office in DreamWorks' lavish, 13-acre Mediterranean-style campus on the Los Angeles River in Glendale, where the former Illinois Wesleyan theatre major spends his days (and most nights) as the studio's head of creative production.

Damaschke is anything but bored these days since he is now responsible for the launch of all DreamWorks' animated movies into production. "I oversee the staffing of directors, producers, story artists, production designers — all the front end, top-level creative talent that comes onto the project to realize the film," he explains.

While Damaschke routinely serves as production manager or even executive producer on DreamWorks movies — including both *Shrek* and *Shrek 2* and the studio's most recent release, *Madagascar* — his role with *Shark Tale*, which was released last fall, shifted as the project unfolded.

Shark Tale was one in a number of the projects on Damaschke's plate when work started in the spring of 2001. "As we moved into production on this particular film, it just made sense organically for me to stay on it and to be the producer," he says.



Animals who escape a zoo to return to the wild are characters in DreamWorks' newest animated film, Madagascar. (Photo provided by DreamWorks)

It was not a bad way for Damaschke to make his producing debut. It was DreamWorks' second highest opening after *Shrek 2*, became one of the top 10 box-office films in 2004, grossed more than \$300 million worldwide, and sold 5.5 million DVDs in its first week of availability in February.

"I think the movie was a great accomplishment," Damaschke says. "The reviews may have been mixed, but I got reviews as an actor and learned that you have to take them with a grain of salt. You take all the reviews with a grain of salt — including the good ones."

Reviews aside, *Shark Tale* brought Damaschke many unforgettable moments — none more so than an Oscar nomination for best animated feature. “You don’t go to work every morning thinking that a nomination will be the result of your work,” says Damaschke of the experience. “But when it happens, it is amazing. Going to the Academy Awards as a nominee was a huge, out-of-body experience.”

Producing *Shark Tale* provided other thrills, too. Damaschke recalls with special fondness the recording session that brought together two cinematic legends, Robert De Niro and Martin Scorsese, to record dialogue for a scene. One of the most amazing things about it, Damaschke notes, is that it was the first time that the actor and director, who had collaborated on classic films like *Taxi Driver*, had ever acted together — even if the movie viewers actually saw a scene between a puffer fish (Scorsese) and a shark (De Niro).

Shark Tale also broke new ground for DreamWorks by becoming the first CG, or computer-generated, film to be produced entirely at the studio’s Glendale campus. The experience was not unfamiliar to Damaschke, who recalled a previous startup.

“It reminded me of being on *The Prince of Egypt*, our first animated film,” he says. “That was truly a startup. We (the studio) didn’t have a thing. We were going out to Ikea to buy lamps. We were building a studio from scratch.

“In this instance, we converted our entire studio to a CG studio. We trained all of our artists to use computers. So I feel very, very proud of the work that people did to make *Shark Tale*, and I was happy to have been a part of it.”

* * *

Once upon a time, back in the Chicago suburb of Justice, Ill., Bill Damaschke had figured that it was all pretty simple, really.

“I thought, ‘Well, I’ll become an actor. And I’ll win awards. And I’ll open my own production company. And then I’ll direct and produce movies.’ From where I was sitting, that’s just what Robert Redford and people like that do,” he says. “Back there in the Chicago suburbs, you could be pretty naïve about the way things work.”

By the time he graduated from high school, Damaschke had set his sights on acting. He chose Illinois Wesleyan largely because it was one of the few colleges at that time which offered a degree in musical theatre. The fact that it was within a few hours from his home was also a factor, he says. “And its small size had the feel of a conservatory experience. I was looking for that kind of experience.”

Damaschke pauses, waiting as the memories materialize. Driving to Bloomington on a Saturday morning for his audition. Meeting with Carole Brandt, then head of the School of Theatre Arts. Returning for a summer weekend when he watched a rising senior named Alison La Placa ’82 play *Lady India* in *Ring Around the Moon*. Serving on the set crew for *Street Scene*, which starred senior Dawn Upshaw ’82 as Mrs. Maurant.

“I do have vivid memories,” he says. “I remember Carole Brandt as being this incredibly nurturing, impressive woman. I also remember other peoples’ performances — Dawn Upshaw in *Street Scene*. I do remember that very, very clearly. And Alison La Placa in a number of productions during my freshman year.”

As for his own performances, Damaschke recalls bigger productions on the main stage — roles in *Dance Magic*, *Home Free*, *A Day in Hollywood/A Night in the Ukraine*, among others. But he has equally clear recollections of dinner theatre performances at the old Fire House, now the Central Station restaurant, in downtown Bloomington, and of the campus Laboratory Theatre.

“I actually did a bunch of things in the Lab Theatre that were, in some ways, more interesting, more risky, and a little bit more what it’s like to be in the real world,” he says. “We did crazy things that were way more sophisticated than the material we should have been working on. But it felt to me like, wow, this is how those actor ensembles get to be so fine-tuned that come from places like Steppenwolf.”

Most of his college recollections focus on theatre, but not all. He recalls, for instance, taking some of the hardest music theory courses of his life and feeling that “it was a real music degree and a real theatre degree, not just some cosmetic music theatre degree.”

And outside of his major, Damaschke remains appreciative of opportunities that he had to pursue such subjects as comparative religious thought and Shakespeare.

He pauses again, this time searching for a professor’s name.

“Mary Ann?” he says, asking himself aloud. “Is that the name? She taught Shakespeare. Is she still there?”

Told that Associate Professor of English Mary Ann Bushman is indeed still teaching Shakespeare, Damaschke asks a favor.

“Will you tell her for me that her classes are still, to this day, some of the favorite, wonderful experiences that I’ve ever had in my educational or professional life. I still look back on those classes, on the papers that I wrote in those classes, on my journals from those classes, all of which I’ve saved. Fantastic. Many theatre students took those classes, but it seemed silly to me that they weren’t required.”



Among the productions Damaschke (third from left) appeared in at Illinois Wesleyan were annual dance show. (Photo provided by IWU School of Theatre Arts)

Those non-theatre courses are, he says, as indelible as his experiences in the theatre and music buildings. Damaschke recalls being excited to sit down each semester and choose electives in literature, religion, or some other discipline.

And yet, as he looks back, the truly defining moment of his Illinois Wesleyan experience was probably the semester-long internship at an acting studio in New York City in the fall after he graduated. “That internship was the cornerstone of taking wonderful theories and ideas about what it means to be an actor and what it means to be in the real world and putting those theories into practice,” he says. “Within that three- or four-month semester, you can pretty much figure out if you’re going to stay or you’re not going to stay.”

Damaschke stayed. For the next five years, he performed in musical theatre, on and off Broadway and with touring companies. Then one day, pretty much out of the blue, he decided to see what Los Angeles was like. He’d never been there before and figured he’d wind up back in New York in the long run.

* * *

Bill Damaschke loved being an actor, absolutely loved everything about it — the preparation, the community experience of putting a show together, the audiences.

So his decision to change directions was based not on dissatisfaction but on curiosity. What would it be like to work for a producer? To be a producer. That’s what caused him to pick up the phone and call the Disney hotline. He’s never looked back. He doesn’t wonder what might have been had he stuck with acting.

“I much prefer not having to worry about the anxiety of auditions, or getting jobs or not getting jobs,” he says. “It wasn’t as if I was forced to make this big decision about not being an actor any more. I just decided to try this other job and wound up being absolutely swept away.”

One aspect of his job at DreamWorks that he especially likes is the ability it gives him to play a role in many different projects and many different stages of those projects — starting with the germ of an idea and ending up at a world premiere.

Among his challenges is keeping the momentum of all those projects going at once. DreamWorks is committed to releasing two animated films a year, and the schedule of those films is already in place through 2008. Films that may not come to fruition for five years or more are already in some stage of development.

Spending millions of dollars to develop a project that anticipates the interests of audiences four or five years down the road can be a little stressful, he admits. Damaschke characterizes the past 10 years at DreamWorks as a “perpetual startup.” The current frenetic pace may, he hopes, at least become more routinized — not that he anticipates it will permit him all that much time to pursue his outside interests, which include architecture. “I’ve been working on this long project with my own house,” he explains. “I’ve joined some architectural committees and spend some time on weekends going on house tours and working on my restoration.”



Damaschke (above, second from right) attended the premiere of *Shrek Tale* at the Venice Film Festival with the movie's directors (from left) Bibo Bergerson, Vicky Jenson, and Rob Letterman. (Photo provided by DreamWorks)

For now, a “typical” day for Damaschke usually revolves around an overflowing calendar of meetings: creative meetings, story meetings, development meetings, artists meetings. It can be grueling, but necessary, he says, in order to keep in daily touch with all the various projects he oversees.

“We have four shows in active production, and those have more than 100 people working on each one of them,” he explains. “At the same time, we may have four that are just ideas but that are beginning to heat up.”

And then there is the matter of getting a green ogre on Broadway.

Damaschke had pushed the idea of turning *Shrek*, perhaps DreamWorks’ hottest property, into a Broadway musical, and he now oversees the project from the studio’s side. “We’ve hired the director and a book writer and are trying to zero in on a composer and lyricist,” he says. “At this point, we are assembling a team, creating a budget, and setting the schedule.” If all this comes together, the green ogre may stomp onto Broadway as early as the 2007-08 season.

Taking *Shrek* from the screen to the stage held special attraction to Damaschke because of his acting and theatre roots. Yet, he observes that the process of creating both an animated and a theatrical production are somewhat similar. “It’s extremely collaborative, very inclusive,” he says. “Every single person who works on the movie is an artist, or a technical person who is artistic, who wants to bring something to the process to make it better. It’s a little bit like doing a play where every single person is invested in it from their expertise to realize the vision and everybody is working to do good, creative work. There is a family, a bonding quality to it — in particular, because we work so hard and so long on these movies.”

Damaschke says that one clear advantage to his having been an actor is that he understands the creative process and what it takes for artists to be comfortable with their working environment. “You know how, when you do your best work, what that feels like and how people are managing you and treating you. I might not have had a lot of business experience initially or knew anything about animation, really, but those things are learnable.”

One of Damaschke’s biggest challenges has been to work in a field that has changed so dramatically in just a few short years. When he got to Disney and worked on *Pocahontas*, it was near the end of a golden age of animation; with DreamWorks, he’s been at the forefront in moving animation into what many regard as a new golden age. He admits that DreamWorks went through some awkward years of trying to find its way as an animation studio and

discovering what kinds of films would suit it best. With *Shrek*, he has said, the studio first “found its voice.” Now CG-animated movies have become some of the most successful films of all time.

Damaschke thinks that his studio will stick with the CG-format for some time. “I think the audience has come to expect something that is very surprising both from a story point of view and also visually, because live-action films have so much visual amazement in them now.”

That is not to suggest, Damaschke quickly adds, that DreamWorks would never entertain producing a traditionally animated film. Some films that are now in development could wind up going that direction, he says. Still, he wonders whether or not a general audience would regard those films as being a little old-fashioned. The simple fact is that a lot of CG-animated films are being produced or developed “because studios see them as movies that people want to see,” he says.

No matter what format, finding that “wow” factor that thrills and amazes audiences remains Damaschke’s primary focus. For that task, he relies on instincts developed from the time he was a boy watching cartoons on T.V. and was drawn into a magical world of fantasy where anything is possible. And the essential qualities that capture the human imagination haven’t really changed that much, he believes.

“We continue to have the challenge to find interesting stories and interesting arenas in which to tell those stories — stories that are visually wonderful and have amazing characters with a lot of heart, a lot of comedy: all the things that make a great movie,” Damaschke says.

As much as he loves the final product, the process by which it is made has become Damaschke’s passion.

“What I love most about what I do,” he says, “is helping to create an environment where people can do their best work and fulfill their dreams in whatever role they have in making a movie.”