Lola Carries Computer Cosmetics to the Next Level

By Jack Egan

Forget the pancake and powder. The latest in makeup for movies is a computerized nip and tuck that goes by the name of digital cosmetic enhancement.

Until recently, digitized makeup fixes for films have involved tasks like removing moles or slight moustaches from the faces of otherwise beautiful actresses to firming up actor's sagging behind.

But in a big leap forward, **Lola**—the leading company in the field—has come up with the computerized equivalent of the fountain of youth. It's on display in the startling first scene of box-office smash *X-Men: The Last Stand*, where stars **Patrick Stewart** and **Ian McKellen** are de-aged by two decades in what amounts to a total digital makeover. "It doesn't look like an effect at all," declared one reviewer, "they're just younger, the clock somehow rolled back."

The attention-grabbing opener of *X-Men 3*, an integral part of the film's plot, has provided Lola—an independent unit of **Colin** and **Greg Strause**'s **Hydraulx** FX house—with a welcome opportunity to talk openly about its activities. Nearly all of Lola's clients are sensitive about having computer-tweaked beauty "secrets" disclosed, so the firm usually is asked to keep its work hush-hush.

Without revealing the film involved, Lola executive producer **Thomas Nittmann** provides one example of a recent request, which was to make a star's cleavage less revealing so the movie could qualify for a G-rating. More frequently, the call to Lola is for a starlet's breasts to be enhanced or an actor grown flabby to get six-pack abs re-applied. Or mundane fixes, like filling the gap in someone's front teeth.

Digital cosmetic enhancement isn't a bargain. It's still very expensive for high definition television. But using the technology can also wind up saving a movie studio a tidy sum if, say, an actress' skin breaks out during a costly shoot. Instead of having to work around the problem for several days, it can be cosmetically fixed later in post.

The hardware Lola uses doesn't come cheap either. Workstations that employ **Autodesk** Inferno

e FX in A *Scanner Darkly*

his personality eventually mes so split that he winds nvestigating himself. The plays neatly into the author's ring motifs of paranoia and ayal, the latter, often self-ayal, since "self" is another tantly shifting "precept" in 's universe. **Robert Downey** his jittery friend, who may—more likely, may not—be what eems, and **Winona Ryder** is D-using girlfriend, whose l" personality, like everyone 's, is likewise up for grabs.

Most emblematic of this are "scramble suits" worn by the ice, a garment that is a con-ntly shifting array of faces and dy types, so that the detectives pear more like a gray blur to yone watching them (and fi-lly, of course, to themselves).

The suits were "a lot easier to escribe in literature," Pallotta bserves, but translating them to lm was a key part of the post-roduction, emblematic of how hat phase was organized for the ntire picture. Indeed, it's hardly air to call it post, since the ani-nating took around 18 months. t was "like making two films,"

Pallotta agrees, and the live-action phase, where microphones could be left in shots and crude props made to stand in for the eventual animated ones—sweat pants were scramble suits—was more like a brief preproduction period leading to the animation.

Since there was no "post house" to take this kind of animation to—since, indeed, the "post" was the point of the process—Pallotta and Linklater kept everything in-house, at the director's **Lone Star** headquarters, using much of the same gear from *Waking Life* but few of the same people.

That gear included **Wacom** tablets for drawing and rendering, and software designed by MIT-trained, but equally-Austin based computer animator **Bob Sabiston**—a Macintosh-based application which, as one of MIT's own blurbs will tell you, "interpolat(es) hand-drawn lines and shapes over video footage."

And while Sabiston returned from *Waking Life* to oversee this latest use of his software, he might be the first to tell you the

Sterling Allen, an artist who works with drawings and photography, and sometimes both together. His rise was swift. He was promoted to be one of the supervising heads of the five main animation groups, each being charged with a particular sequence of scenes, or, in the case of the scramble suit group, a particular effect.

Each group would get its scenes in QuickTime, and go to work with its Wacom tablets, sending roughed-out scenes back to the computers, where after making

scale," Allen says. And why not? It was the kind of place where people brought their dogs to work, he adds.

Allen worked on a lot of the close-ups of Downey's frenetic character, using RotoShop's vector-based line tool, as well as its polygon tool, which could extrapolate color and shading to an immediate area.

Since other people were working on long shots of characters, or backgrounds in given scenes—and since scramble suits walked in and out of those scenes—each

to ramp up from almost scratch, and the willingness to train new people, make *Scanner* unique among Hollywood offerings. (The film is released by **Warner Classics**.)

Now that Allen is back to doing his own, gallery-bound work, he notes that he isn't necessarily waiting for the next film gig to come along, but he's glad for the experience. "Any job you work is gonna change your art," he states. As for the film, and its disorienting, yet appropriate, look, "I think it worked out."

Luke Perry, in red shirt, and the cast of *Windfall*

Lola

and Flame for compositing can cost well into the six figures. The company also relies on some 30 servers. "It's one of the biggest render farms around," notes

Mittman. "So when a shot is finished, it can be immediately rendered and we go on to another shot right away. It allows us to do a high volume of shots in a relatively short time frame. A lot of the requests for cosmetic fixes typically come in as a movie is

finishing up and about to go into digital intermediate phase, so we need to be able to respond quickly."

The use of computers for cosmetic purposes took hold initially in the world of music videos, where the Strause brothers

started. "A lot of divas who want their faces to be flawless in a video insist on having this written into their contracts," says **Guy Botham**, director of marketing for Lola. The brothers decided to bring the technique to movies. "Today computer cosmetics

holds promise for aging stars to extend their careers without undergoing repeated rounds of plastic surgery, often with undesirable results," says Botham, "I wouldn't be surprised if many A-list actors soon start making this a contract condition."
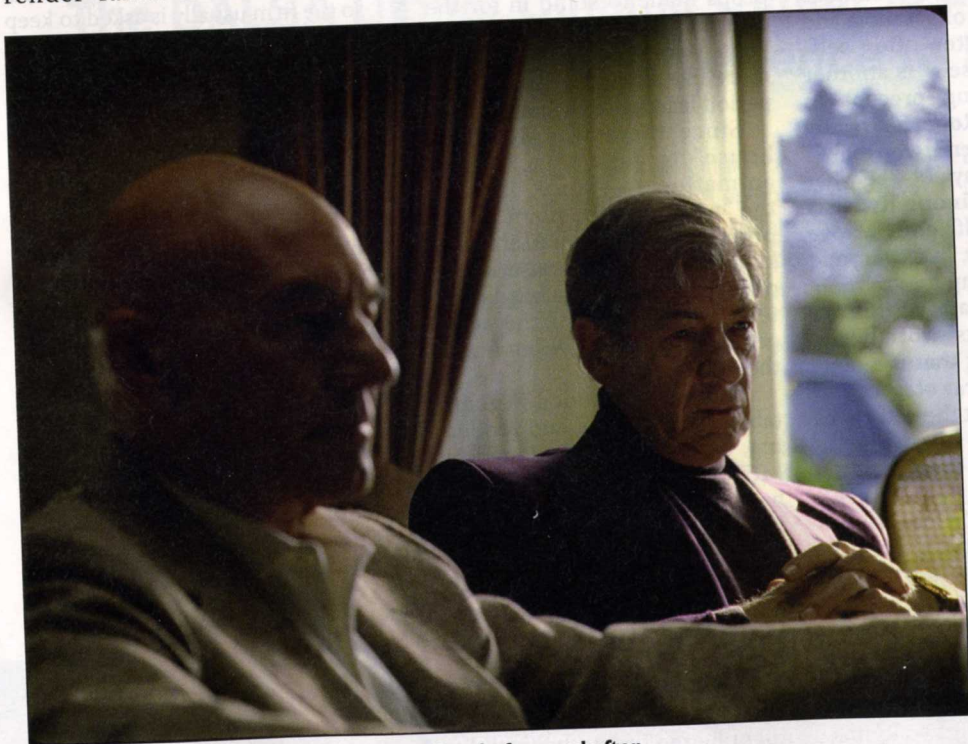
X-Men 3's Patrick Stewart and Ian McKellen, before and after