

How do you bridge the gap between fantasy and reality when cartoon and human characters are interacting on a movie screen? That was the overarching question for the creative team that produced *Stuart Little 2* for Columbia Pictures.

The movie is an adaptation of a book by E.B. White about an urban family that includes a mouse named Stuart. The story is set in New York City during contemporary times. Geena Davis, Hugh Laurie and Jonathan Lipnicki portray the Little family with Michael J. Fox as the voice of Stuart.

Rob Minkoff, who was also at the helm during the original *Stuart*



Steven Poster orchestrates look for *Stuart Little 2*

Little, directed the sequel. The creative team assembled by Minkoff included cinematographer Steven Poster, ASC, production designer Bill Brzeski, senior visual effects supervisor Jerome Chen, animation supervisor Tony Bancroft and costume designer Mona May.

Poster points out that a totally collaborative environment was essential, since the actors interact with animated characters in some 65 to 70 percent of the shots.

"Within minutes of meeting our little guy (Stuart), the audience has to accept him as a member of the family," Poster says. "I give a lot of the credit to the actors who did voice-overs. They help make the characters come alive. The quality of the animation is amazing, and the compositing by Sony Picture Imageworks is seamless."

The original *Stuart Little* was produced entirely on stages at Sony Studios. The sequel seamlessly blends scenes filmed at practical locations, including Central Park, with footage produced on studio sets, including a replica of Fifth Avenue, the Little's house and the entrance to Central Park.

"The first *Stuart Little* was produced in very diffused and subdued light and colors," Poster says. "The sequel has a different visual grammar. I had a mandate from Rob to create a sunnier and more colorful palette, which included wardrobe, props and quality of light. There is also more camera movement, which adds

breadth to the grammar. We created a look which is appropriate for the tenor of this story."

Poster employed some new tools, including a 50K SoftSun™ from Lightning Strikes, which he used to mimic real sunlight on the stage. Four of the units were on a track covering 270 degrees around three sides of the set. Two of them were on a yoke that could be moved up and down as well as around the set.

"This allowed us to move the sun quickly, and it provided strong, directional light that we used for sunlight," Poster says. "We also used an 80' by 40' softbox colored half blue to create skylight and interactive bounce."

Poster heard about the new 500-speed Kodak Vision Expression 500T film 5284 while it was still in development. He arranged to shoot a test and decided to record the entire feature with the new emulsion.

"I liked the way the new negative renders colors and contrast," he says. "There are a lot of yellows and reds in our wardrobe. It is also great for skin tones. There is a vibrancy I like. This emulsion also renders less contrasty images than the other 500-speed films. That was a factor because I anticipated shooting big scenes in bright exterior sunlight which had to blend seamlessly with the sunlight we created on stage."

Poster also used the same negatives for recording elements of effects shots. The effects team liked the way characters in foregrounds separated from blue and green



Steven Poster, ASC (centre) on the set of *Stuart Little 2*.

screen backgrounds, which contributed to making composite shots believable.

Poster explains that because of all the visual effects scenes where CG characters are composited with live-action footage, the studio decided that all of the negative in the final cut would be converted to digital files at 4K resolution at Sony Imageworks.

The high-resolution files gave Poster and Chen headroom for retaining nuances in contrast and colors and details in shadows and highlights that render a filmatic look. "I believe that every element of every shot of every scene informs the audience," Poster says. "We're working with mouse whiskers, fur, feathers and textures that need the fineness of the highest resolution we can get."

Stuart Little 2 was digitally mastered at Imageworks, where Poster orchestrated the continuity and nuances in the look by fine tuning images using a 5D Colossus. The 4K resolution digital files were recorded onto color intermediate film, which is used as the master for release printing by Deluxe Labs. 