

Trumbull planning production facility on Southfield tract

Special effects master says studio will reinvent industry

By Emily Kramer

SOUTHFIELD — Douglas Trumbull has seen the future, and it's green. An enormous green screen, that is.

It's an odd setting for a revolution — over half of Douglas and Julia Trumbull's property is devoted to Julia's donkeys, goats and sheep, and the nearly 50 acre total is nestled in the heart of New Marlborough in the quiet village of Southfield.

Up the hill from the farm, three buildings house Douglas's latest project. One warehouse, a small garage and a repurposed art studio form the hub of a world-wide network, and inside the warehouse is the giant green screen, one part what

Douglas called "an uncanny window into another world."

It started over 20 years ago when Douglas Trumbull left California and moved to the Berkshires.

After decades of work on big budget special effects for movies like "2001: A Space Odyssey," "Star Trek: The Movie" and "Blade Runner," he refocused and worked on "pushing the envelope on what is possible in film."

He began by developing the Back to the Future Ride for Universal Studios, a project completed in an old mill and a "fantastic success," according to Douglas Trumbull.

"We got the job because it didn't matter where we did

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Douglas Trumbull and Paul Lacombe hope to revolutionize film-making in at new studio in Southfield.

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it, so we just did it here. And that opened up some more opportunities for us."

The donkeys were a later addition, but even before the farm, the Trumbulls didn't come to the Berkshires alone. Douglas Trumbull brought more than just luggage and cameras along with him to the hill towns of Massachusetts: He brought Paul Lacombe.

"I came here to work with Doug," said Lacombe. "If it wasn't for him, I'd probably still be in corporate...I wouldn't have started my own business." A soft-spoken man with a two children and a wife, Lacombe also owns and runs UNREEL, a Great Barrington-based company that "provides real-time 3D Graphics solutions for virtual sets, broadcast on-air graphics and on-set visualization for broadcast television, corporate visualization

and feature-film production," according to their website.

If you have seen ESPN on-screen graphics, or watched the NBC election coverage with poll results, you've seen the work of Lacombe and his people. "Three of us live in the Berkshires and a couple of others live in Montreal, Spain...It's great. We just had a company-wide meeting over Skype this morning, and the neighbors don't even know we're here."

Douglas Trumbull and Lacombe are collaborating on creating "a new industry" in the small warehouse on Trumbull's property. They call it "virtual sets" and according to Trumbull, it can revolutionize the film industry. "I can make a film that is currently made with \$20 million, and make it for two (million)," said Trumbull.

Trumbull uses a combination of cutting edge film technology, some of which he designed himself, to film live actors, and in real time,

put them in any set he wants. "Instead of waiting to do everything in post-production, we can do it immediately," Douglas Trumbull said with a slight smile. "It's kind of like what Cameron did with 'Avatar,' but flipped around. I like working with live actors, and Cameron digitized his actors and put them into a virtual reality. It's incredibly expensive. This is simpler."

The "virtual set" is where Lacombe and his crew come in. According to Lacombe, the technology that he uses to create real-time graphics for broadcast television is the same technology they would use in films.

And the first, large-scale test for the duo is coming: Douglas Trumbull is currently working on a feature-film set in space. "The film will be our proof that this works," said Douglas Trumbull.

Douglas Trumbull didn't specify a release date, but he and his collaborators are getting ready to go full-scale

soon. They just finished a make-up and wardrobe room, and will be putting a permanent addition onto the warehouse to fit a "theater of the future."

Even though this new process eliminates the need for large-scale sets and huge crews, it does generate massive amounts of information. A room in the re-purposed art studio has been set aside to house the computers and provide storage space, but according to Douglas Trumbull,

"We need fiber. We're huge supporters of the WiredWest initiative, because at the moment we have two DSL lines, and that isn't nearly enough. We can't transport the files by hand — that defeats the whole point. If we're going to do films, we need to be connected to studios around the world." Lacombe agreed, adding, "We're okay in Great Barrington, but out here, they're definitely limited."