Milk VFX rose from the ashes of The Mill’s TV department, took on high-profile projects from launch, and marked its first birthday this June. The company had further reason to celebrate more recently, winning one of the first TVBAwards. Will Cohen, CEO of the London-based visual effects company spoke to Holly Ashford about Milk’s journey.

Cohen began his career in the early ’90s like many others in the industry, as a runner at Soho post firm The Mill. After moving to several different companies Cohen worked in live action commercials film production, which he soon “fell out of love with”, having “always had a synergy with post production and visual effects”. However, Cohen admits that in 2013, “the television and film business fell off a cliff and there wasn’t a lot of work being done”. The volatile market impacted The Mill, which shut the doors of its TV post department. Rather than deter Cohen, he saw The Mill’s closure as “the perfect opportunity” to realise his “secret desire”. He explains, “when we work in companies for other people, we always think we could do things better ourselves – if only we had the opportunity – to create utopia. But you kind of never expect it to happen.”

Addicted to the high-end
Cohen founded his utopia with six others, and, although he says none were entrepreneurs, they had several years of experience between them, and were “already a functioning team”. The close-knit family-feel of this team exists today. Cohen stresses: “Luckily we’re all still friends. It all worked out, and the business did come back. It helped that the visual effects community were very supportive.” A number of deals were still being done, up until the week Milk opened its doors, and Cohen received words of advice from “rival companies” including the dangers of living on adrenaline: “Adrenaline is highly addictive. Once you’ve put all these deals together you actually have to roll your sleeves up and get on with the work.” The priority now was making sure all the jobs were done well, and not getting “addicted to the high-end”. You don’t get much higher-end than Universal Studios, Milk’s first client. “I will forever be in the dept of (senior vice president of visual effects at Universal Pictures), Jennifer Bell.” Mill Film had worked on fantasy action feature 47 Ronin and following its closure, Bell offered the new VFX house a package of shots. The company also came to an agreement with the BBC to work on the Doctor Who 50th anniversary special, The Day of the Doctor, which later earned the company a BAFTA Television Craft Award.

Cohen describes the win as “a fairy tale end to year one”, and a well-deserved one too, considering the level of work achieved. The 80-minute episode was simulcast and screened in cinemas globally, and featured the villainous Half-Face Man. Milk replaced one entire side of actor Peter Ferdinando’s head in 87 of the 117 digital shots. The company created the CG hollow cage-like structure which makes up the missing half of Half-Face Man’s head as well as a T-Rex in the opening sequence, the Victorian London cityscape, and helped drive the episode’s climax with wide fly-over views of the Thames.

Early on, Milk VFX also confirmed global hit Sherlock, as well as Jonathan Strange and Mr Norrell, a seven-part series, adapted from a 2004 novel, to be shown on the BBC next year. Soon after came confirmation of Natural History Museum Alive 3D, presented by David Attenborough and broadcast on New Year’s Day 2014. The production was to earn Milk its second honour, the TVBAward for Achievement in VFX. The company also won the contract to work on “the first high-profile UK tax-break that got Americans to come to the UK”; the immensely popular, cult TV hit 24. The team created the drones that chased Jack Bauer through London, CG water, fire, smoke and blood and numerous explosions.
TV buzz

So how has the industry changed from Milk to Milk? VFX in the UK was a “cottage industry” in the ’90s, says Cohen, crediting the huge Harry Potter franchise with transforming it into a centre of excellence to rival Los Angeles. “That helped stabilise the industry more than anything else. All the main companies knew they had work to do every year or every other year, for a decade.” However, “there was a global loss felt when Harry Potter ended, as nothing came along to replace it.” It is fortunate, then, that since Milk’s inception there has been a renaissance in TV programming – big-budget, cinematic, binge-worthy shows have been hitting our screens, from fantasy epic Game of Thrones, to fleetingly addictive Breaking Bad. “There’s a massive buzz about television,” asserts Cohen. “The sophistication of storytelling is much more prevalent today on television. We’re doing things in TV we never thought we’d do two or three years ago.”

After “a great fist batch of work” and the seemingly unstoppable rise of great TV content, what is next in the pipeline for Milk? Cohen remains tight-lipped about upcoming projects, as the company is at the “exciting and nerve-wracking” stage of closing forthcoming jobs. What he can share is that the Christmas/New Year period will act as a fantastic showcase for the company. Milk has completed work on Get Santa, a festive Brit comedy starring Jim Broadbent, the Doctor Who Christmas Special, and the “powerful, epic” Jonathan Strange. The company also worked on film Ex Machina by The Beach director Alex Garland, set for UK cinema release in January.

Personal service and objectives

Seeing projects come to life and watching weeks of work on the big (or small) screen is surely one of the most rewarding things about the VFX business? Cohen agrees: “It’s inspiring watching something from a chat to a script, to a shoot, to a drawing, to the edit, to finishing it.” He also strips this idea down to its most basic sentiment, saying that one of the draws of the industry is the chance to “help to tell a good story, whether it’s a TV show or a feature film”. Working with the newest software and tools and producing visually-stunning effects is a highlight, but Cohen says, “really, it’s all about the people. Forget all the work: at the end of the day, what you take home with you are the relationships, the fun you’ve had and the conversations you’ve had with people.”

The firm has 100 seats and is described as “boutique” on its website. However, “boutique” is “really referring to a sense of personal service and a culture,” says Cohen, “free of office politics, with six like-minded co-founders” at its helm and with “very simple, very pure objectives.” These objectives: to tell a good story, to “do something innovative and creatively exciting”, and foster a family-feel within the company, have resulted in Milk overcoming the “doom and gloom” of 2013, with a raft of projects slated for 2015 as well as “strategic (geographical) expansion”, which Cohen is keeping tightly under wraps.

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