



THE Cartoonist

He got his start drawing comics for *The Mirror*, Augustana's student newspaper. Today, David Wolter, class of 2004, is a story artist with Dreamworks.

Every artist has a story.

Take Vincent van Gogh. Before deciding to pursue his love of art, he worked as a clerk in a bookstore, was an art salesman, and served as a preacher where, stories say, he was dismissed for being “overzealous.”

Or Leonardo da Vinci. Years before painting the *Mona Lisa*, da Vinci got his start working as an apprentice in the fabled workshop of Andrea del Verrocchio, the leading artist of Florence.

They say Walt Disney was selling small sketches and drawings to friends and neighbors at the tender age of seven and often doodled pictures of animals and nature instead of doing homework. At 16, he joined the Red Cross and spent a year driving an ambulance in France.

Then there’s David Wolter, Augustana class of 2004, an up-and-coming story artist for Dreamworks Animation, based near Los Angeles, Calif.

He has a story, as well.

A native of Colorado Springs, Colo., the 6-foot, 10-inch tall Wolter came to Augustana

Or, the 2004 cartoon illustrating what Wolter called “Augie’s Obsession with Moses.” The piece featured sketches of the Moses statue near Morrison Commons, the Moses sculpture in the Mikkelsen Library and, long-time (and long-haired) assistant professor of art, Gerry Punt.

“I was directly commenting on what I saw happening at Augie. Observation is the first step for any artist. If you want to say something about the world, you have to pay attention to what’s happening in it.”

Following graduation, he worked as a caricature artist at Valley Fair in Shakopee, Minn.

“It was a good way to work on my craft and make money. It was great training.”

Wanting more, Wolter took a chance and moved to California, hoping to break into the animation industry. He continued to do caricatures and began working as a substitute art teacher while he worked on his portfolio.

In 2009, he was accepted into California Institute of the Arts’ animation and cartooning program. Dubbed CalArts, the school was formed by Walt and Roy Disney and is

that people can watch and walk away from feeling like they can fight the battles in their own life.”

At 24 drawings-per-second, the film took months to create. But the hard work, Wolter said, was worth it.

“[Eyrie] was the last film played that night and it was received extremely well. When everyone came out of the theatre, they were all talking about it. I was approached by all the major studios right after the filming – Pixar, Disney and Dreamworks – it was like a dream.

An executive from Dreamworks offered Wolter a job that evening.

“It was the best possible scenario – better than I could have hoped for,” he said.

Since that magical night, he’s been in training at Dreamworks’ Mediterranean villa-like campus near L.A.

His office is small and the walls are plastered with drawings and other works that inspire him, including author Bill Peet.

“Bill Peet – he’s a huge name at Disney. He’s an author who has this really great,

“I always say I learned how to draw in Algebra because I hated math so much.”

– David Wolter, Class of 2004

in 2000 planning to play basketball and major in business.

Things didn’t go exactly as he’d planned.

He ended up being a self-described bench-warmer; he changed his major to art; and, to his surprise, he made a name for himself as the creator of “The Back Alley,” the popular comic strip that ran each week from 2002-2004 in *The Mirror*; Augustana’s student newspaper.

“I was obsessed with cartoons as a kid. I was always drawing and doodling in class. But, I’ve also been 6’10” since I was 14 years old, so people expected me to play basketball. I sort of devoted myself to that. Art kind of fell by the wayside in high school; I only really did it while I was bored – like in math class,” Wolter says. “I always say I learned how to draw in algebra because I hated math so much.”

During his junior year, a friend suggested doing a cartoon for *The Mirror*.

“[The Back Alley] was a highlight of my college career – it gave me a voice and a place in the community. It was a really fun experience for me.”

Of “The Back Alley” strips, Wolter says he had complete creative control over each cartoon. That freedom allowed him to combine his quick wit, sarcasm, cynicism and humor with his love of drawing.

Take the 2002 cartoon depicting former Augustana President Bruce Halverson as “Super Bruce,” where he was prepared to ward off potential protestors of the Boe Forum featuring former Speaker of the House Newt Gingrich.

recognized around the world for its esteemed performing and visual arts programs.

“It was a four-year program, but I was able to enter as a second-year student because of my Augustana background and the strength of my portfolio.”

At the close of his second year, Wolter’s animated film, “Eyrie,” was chosen to be among a select group of 25 short films to premier at the “Producer’s Show,” a year-end event attended by students, faculty members and representatives from major animation studios.

“Eyrie” is set in the Old West and follows a young boy as he discovers the connection between responsibility and love. To date, the film has been viewed more than 190,000 times on YouTube.

In developing the film, Wolter says he focused on three elements.

“I’ve always been fascinated with the idea of human-to-animal transformation. It’s such a symbolic idea. In college, when I put on a jersey, I was identifying myself as a Viking. There was a sense that my identity had changed. As a kid, the ability to put on a shirt or a costume and identify myself as something else was fascinating to me. In the film, I really wanted to explore the idea of human-to-animal transformation.”

“I also wanted to have a film that had a sense of place. I loved the idea that there could be a mythological tale set in the Old West but ... I also wanted to create something that the audience could watch, take part in, and feel like they’ve changed or been impacted. It’s really a coming-of-age story

simple, direct style that’s perfect for storyboarding,” he said, adding that he also looks to his colleagues for support and inspiration.

“My next-door office neighbor is the guy who designed Dark-Winged Duck.”

For now, he’s working with pencils, paper and markers. His desk is covered in pencil shavings and his hands are black from pencil smudges.

As a story artist, he’ll use a “cintiq,” a computer screen that allows the user to draw on it with an electronic pen, as he works to develop an elaborate comic strip of a finished film.

“I’ll be required to come up with a story and characters and have them react and interact. At the same time, I’m thinking about the fundamentals of film making – lighting, editing, cutting to the next shot. It’s a really challenging job.”

As he thinks back about his time at Augustana, Wolter says his classes and experiences prepared him well for his future.

“So many things dove-tailed nicely with what I’m doing now, such as, “Creative Writing” with Dr. Patrick Hicks and “World Making” with Dr. Richard Swanson. Carl Grupp let me do my independent study as a comic book. He was ahead of his time. He turned me on to artists who I’m just now learning to appreciate.”

As for what the future holds, Wolter says he’s content to enjoy life at the moment. He got married earlier this fall and he’ll turn 30 in November.

“I’m really happy where I am right now,” he said. “I’m not sketching the future just yet.”