

# Interview with Dave Rand

## Carsey-Wolf Center at UC Santa Barbara

8-11 minutes

---

Dave Rand is a visual effects artist and activist with stints at some of the most recognizable firms in the business, including Disney, Rhythm & Hues, Sony ImageWorks, and Digital Domain. His film credits aren't too shabby either: *Frozen*, *Life of Pi*, *Transformers 3*, and *Journey to the Center of the Earth*, among others. Despite this success, his career is perhaps indicative of the larger [pressures](#) plaguing the visual effects industry. Currently based in Los Angeles, he's also worked in Montreal and Vancouver. No less than six visual effects firms went bankrupt while he was on the payroll—some of them still owe money to former employees. Rand only recently moved from a hotel to an apartment. Now that he's signed the lease, he says he's done relocating to Canada for work.

Recognizing the plight of local VFX firms and their employees, Rand decided to take action when he helped organize the [2013](#) and [2014](#) protests outside the Academy Awards ceremonies. Nearly 500 supporters showed up for the 2013 rally; even more participated the following year. Today Rand remains a vocal opponent against foreign tax incentives and frequently speaks

out against Hollywood's "race to the bottom."

In this excerpt from our interview, Rand shares an account of what it was like for employees of [Rhythm & Hues](#) when the firm filed for Chapter 11 bankruptcy.

Inside R&H's Bankruptcy

**Can you tell us the Rhythm & Hues story as you experienced it? How did things unfold for the artists there? It's our understanding that it was one of the best shops to work at in the business.**

Oh, by far. That's why its bankruptcy caused such an outrage in the visual effects community, worldwide. Rhythm & Hues was like the Alamo of digital effects in Los Angeles. It was run by John Hughes, who is one of the best people I've ever worked for anywhere. Just a super friendly guy. We became friends because my office was so close to his and he was an avid reader of all of these causes and really, really behind growing the visual effects industry, both for the VFX studios and for the artists.

Anyway, after taking a break from work for a while, my friend called me from Rhythm saying, "I heard you're in L.A. You have to come by and see this show! It's a giant water show!" As I said, I love doing water. So I visit and they show me stuff from *Life of Pi*. I'm like, "Oh my God, this is awesome." I wanted to work on this movie.

So they hired me on for the long run. *Life of Pi* was an amazing experience, although they really had to pack the joint so it was kind of close quarters a little bit. I'm used to having maybe one

other person in my office, but I'm usually on my own. In Vancouver, on *Transformers*, we were like an Indian call center. Those things are fucking horrible. And the temperature soared. They couldn't keep up the air conditioning. They treated us like crap. They don't care. It's like those guys down in the bilge, rowing the boat, "Throw 'em some more food and shut 'em up!"

On *Pi* the worst of it was it being a little close-quarters. They had to bring on such a huge staff to do that movie. It was great that they were employing so many people in the United States but I could sense right away that there were some things happening with *Life of Pi* that were familiar. I'm on version 30 of this shot and the director hasn't seen it yet. And Bill Westenhofer was absolutely one of the best visual effects supervisors that I've ever worked for. You know, the guy that got the Academy Award? Brilliant. I really wish he was directing the whole movie, I really do. They say Ang Lee was there more than I perceived, but I never saw him in dailies. Dailies at Disney are called "Director Time." That's what it should be, one decision-maker. But that's another discussion.

So Bill's doing a great job, but then there's a lot of studio stuff and tension with Ang Lee that I'm not privy to, and suddenly the whole operation goes on hold. And my mother's dying so I have to leave. And then my mom passes and I come back and *Life of Pi* is still on fucking hold. There was another show in-house that they put me on, *Seventh Son*, but then after a while I did nothing. It was a lot of us doing nothing. And they had to keep the whole staff there because when freaking Fox decides to put the movie back on line, we can't just let everybody go and try

and muster that talent.

To keep things afloat, the studios decided to loan Rhythm enough money to finish their movies. Loan them money to finish their movies! “You’re not paying us back with the shots you’re doing. You’re paying us back the cash we gave you with our overtime.” It was just unbelievable.

Finally *Life of Pi* comes back on line. There’re all these different changes. There had to have been a ton. I mean, Rhythm & Hues paid for the movies. We paid for the movie! There’s a ton of visual effects artists, including me, that are owed money. Some of them a tremendous amount of money because Rhythm had a policy where you could do overtime, but in lieu of raises along the way they would give employees sabbaticals and stuff, which artists love. You know, you go do your own thing for a while.

There are people who are owed, like, \$90,000. It’s as if they actually paid for the movie. I love to say that Hollywood has taxpayers paying for their movie – you know, from various countries and states through these wacko incentive programs – and then they’ve got visual effects artists paying for the movie because we’re not getting paid and companies go bankrupt. Then we all pay a premium to go see the movie, right?

So Rhythm is going to be bankrupted. There’s a Friday fucking meeting. John Hughes is up there. I’m like, I’ve stood at too many of these. This is just getting old. “Your paychecks are going to stop but just keep working on the movie. If you go home, we understand.” There are no jobs in L.A. so where the

hell are you going to go unless you want to move to Canada or New Zealand or London or Australia? Where are you going to go? People have leases and homes and stuff, so we're all just hoping for the best. That's why visual effects artists keep working when the money stops. Because you can take our money away but we actually get married to our work. We start living inside of our shot work. So you take my money away, but don't take my shot away too and leave me with nothing. I know that's a weird way to think of it, but it's valid.

And then came this Sunday night where my friend Bobby calls me. He goes, "Did you get the call yet?" I'm like, "What?" "Yeah they're calling people not to come in tomorrow, it's all going to shit. It's all over."

And at this point, I'm living in a hotel. I had surrendered to just living in hotels because you can't sign leases anymore and you can't buy a house because you never know what country you have to go work in. And even though I'm considered a good visual effects artist and I've been on the staff of like five, six different companies, you never know how long that's going to last you. So you can't buy a house. It's just, like, so flimsy. Somebody just needs to rattle these film executives and go, "What are you doing?! You have these prized racehorses and you're beating them to death."

So I drive in the next morning. I'm walking in from where we had to park, which is an eighth of a mile to Rhythm because they had expanded so much. Only the original staff got to park close. But John Hughes parked where we all had to park. He drove a little shitty car. He's the coolest guy ever. He's walking in with

me, and says, "Oh, good, you're still here! I put a word in." I'm like, "Thanks, no one called me but are you sure I'm still here?" He's like, "Well, if you didn't get a call, you're still here, I'm pretty sure." So I go to swipe my card to let us in the gate. My card doesn't work. He's like, "Oh, let me get that." His works. I'm like, "Oh, I don't think I have a job." He's like, "No, no, no, let's find out. Let's find out."

So we go in and we go up to the front desk. I'm not on the list of people who are not supposed to be there but my card doesn't work. I went upstairs and I able to log in. But this is what life has become: you never know what's happening. How can you be creative when this is your world? [Incentives] have turned California into a creative dustbowl.

In any event, I can log on to my shot, so that's a good sign! But I don't know what I'm supposed to do. So I just start working on what I was doing when I was there last. And then my line supervisor walks by and says, "Oh, you're still here, thank God!" He had to walk around to see which part of his staff was still there so he could put together his responsibilities. So he goes, "Just keep working, I guess. I don't know."