

# C.S. Lewis' Chronicles of Narnia headed to the big screen

**Produced by Walden Media and Walt Disney Studios, the film is scheduled to release in late 2005**

Following the success of The Lord of the Rings series, another fantasy film project with spiritual overtones is making its way to the big screen during the 2005 holiday season.

Walden Media—owned by Christian billionaire Philip Anschutz—is partnering with the Walt Disney Studios to create The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe, based on the children's book by C.S. Lewis first published in 1950.

Walden Media and Disney will co-finance the \$100 million project, with Disney distributing it worldwide and retaining the merchandise and all ancillary rights, Walt Disney Studios Chairman Dick Cook said. Plans for a Narnia video game already are in the works.

"We're pleased to partner once again with Walden Media," Cook said. "I think this is just the kind of movie audiences are looking for, and we're thrilled to be able to bring it to the screen."

The Chronicles of Narnia is one of the most successful series in the history of children's literature, with more than 85 million copies sold to date. Walden has optioned the rights to

all seven of the titles, and Disney has optioned the right to retain its partnership with Walden for the entire series.

“Disney has been a great friend and partner with our company on Holes, Ghosts of the Abyss and this summer’s Around the World in 80 Days,” said Walden co-founders Cary Granat and Michael Flaherty. “The combination of C.S. Lewis’ visionary Chronicles of Narnia with the incredible strength and uniqueness of the Walt Disney brand and organization makes this a true dream project for us.”

Director Andrew Adamson (Shrek and Shrek 2) and award-winning writer Ann Peacock (A Lesson Before Dying) signed on to bring the first of the classic tales to theaters. Although casting had not been fully announced at press time, Tilda Swinton (Adaptation, Vanilla Sky) had been cast in the pivotal role of the White Witch and James McAvoy (Band of Brothers) was to play Tumnus.

Scheduled to be filmed this summer in New Zealand, The Lion, the Witch and the Wardrobe tells the story of siblings Peter, Susan, Edmund and Lucy Pevensie, who are separated from their parents in London during World War II and sent to the country for their own safety. Once ensconced in an eccentric uncle’s estate, the children soon discover a magic wardrobe that leads them to the mystical world of Narnia. There, a classic battle of good vs. evil unfolds, with plenty of spiritual analogy that centers around Lewis’ Christian worldview.

Special-effects studio Rhythm & Hues is expected to create more than 700 shots for the film, including matte paintings and photo-realistic, computer-generated characters, such as Aslan, the talking lion. The effects studio is known for its recent work creating digital characters for such films as

Daredevil, Scooby-Doo and its sequel, and Dr. Seuss' The Cat in the Hat.

Walden Media burst onto the film scene in 2001, co-founded by Granat, a former Miramax film executive, and Flaherty, an education reformer. Walden is part of the Anschutz Film Group (AFG), along with Bristol Bay Productions, which focuses on projects that offer "compelling and positive messages that the entire family can enjoy," and Crusader Entertainment, which produced the Christian movie Joshua. AFG is a subsidiary of The Anschutz Company, an investment and holding company Anschutz owns.

The media-shy Anschutz, who made his first fortune in oil and founded the Anschutz Company in 1958, today owns vast holdings in real estate, transportation, entertainment, communications and more. His entertainment holdings include 78 percent of Regal Entertainment group, which includes the Regal Cinemas, Edwards Theaters and United Artists Theaters.

The privately owned company recently purchased The San Francisco Examiner and owns the Staples Center in Los Angeles as well as sports franchises there. Anschutz is also chairman and majority owner of Qwest Communications, the nation's fourth-largest long-distance company.

Walden Media produced several highly regarded family-friendly films in its first three years, and planned to release Carlisle School, about the life of Olympic gold medal winner Jim Thorpe, in September, and I Am David starring James Caviezel (The Passion of the Christ) in October. In addition, Regal Cinemas has heightened awareness of Christian music in the last year through three premieres. The company hosted DVD release parties on the big screen for Third Day and MercyMe,

as well as a live presentation of the 35th Annual Gospel Music Association Music Awards on 50 theaters nationwide.

**Natalie Nichols Gillespie**