

## Reprising his role in 'Sex and the City'

By CATHERINE BAUM Staff Writer



KEVIN GUTTING

*Edward Check sits in his home studio in Easthampton with a scale model of Carrie Bradshaw's apartment he created during his role as the art director for HBO's "Sex and the City."*

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EASTHAMPTON - A Smith College professor who lives in Easthampton is the art director for the long-awaited "Sex and the City: The Movie" which is being released this week.

Edward Check, 47, who moved from Manhattan to western Massachusetts in 2001, is intimately familiar with the characters and their stories. He worked as art director for the first four seasons of HBO's hit comedy series "Sex and the City" on which the movie is based.

But his involvement with the film was a bit serendipitous, sparked, he said, when he was back in the city last spring, chatting with a friend over coffee in a New York City deli, when the show's producer spotted him and said "We might make the movie this summer."

Check had left Manhattan so he could teach theater and film set and production design at Smith, (the college from which, by the way, "Sex and the City" character Charlotte York graduated before moving to New York in the show). During their "little reunion on the street," Executive Producer John Melfi asked Check to return to the city for more "Sex" - the making of "Sex and the City: The Movie," which is being premiered in New York City tonight in a Union Square theater ahead of its national release Friday.

As the art director of several movies and the first four of the series' six seasons, Check knew what to expect when he took on the job. It would entail drawing hundreds of drafts, working 12-hour days, living out of a suitcase, managing a \$3 million art budget and more.

Check's moviemaking credentials are impressive. He was art director for "Spiderman," "Family Man," "Meet Joe Black," "The First Wives Club," "Batman Forever," "Nobody's Fool" and "Six Degrees of Separation."

Still, despite such a cinematic pedigree, Check is modest about his role in "Sex in the City."

"The truth of the matter is, it's such a hard job, nobody wants to do it," he said during an interview in his Clark Street home last week. "Making a film is hard. Making a film in New York City is five times harder."

But, having "grown up," as he puts it, with the show's characters - Carrie, Samantha, Miranda and Charlotte - and the crew who made it possible, Check considered the job.

"I had been such a part in the beginning of the show," said Check. In fact, he received two Emmy nominations for "Outstanding Art Direction" for his work on the show in 2000 and 2001. During his tenure, he said, he made close connections.

"Any people who come together and spend so much time together, it's like an alternate family," said Check.

But as anyone who follows movie headlines well knows, the making of this movie was never a sure bet. After he agreed to work on it, he was told it wasn't going to happen. Then he was told it would. Then he was told it wouldn't. That was frustrating for Check, who had to inform Smith of a leave-of-absence request, should he need to take one. Finally, he made an agreement with

Melfi that if the movie was really going to be made, Melfi would call the college's dean of faculty seeking permission for Check's leave of absence.

"This way I knew he was serious," said Check.

Check finally took his leave from July to December, when he worked on the movie that picks up the characters' lives four years later, which puts the women in their 40s.

While he was in Manhattan, Check received calls about directing art for six other movies. But, he said, working on this movie "solidified" his decision to get out of film production full-time.

"When you're young it's exciting; as you get older, your priorities change," Check said. "It took me until my 40s until I felt like I actually had something to give in return. I love teaching ... I love passing the creative torch to the students and saying 'it's your turn.'"

Check's job was to supervise four assistant art directors, carpenters, painters and materials - "everything from lumber to nails" - for the film's 80 sets.

The most difficult challenge Check said he encountered when he started this last summer was that HBO could not find any of the show's original drafts "for anything." Check and his assistants had to redraft the sets using DVDs of the series as guides. The art department started working on the film in July, about two months before the acting started in mid-September.

"I'm always planning for what we're doing two weeks down the road" said Check. "You have to keep everyone talking and moving. The camera can never stop rolling ... it's just too expensive."

Check, a graduate of the Yale School of Drama and State University of New York, College at Purchase, started working for the "Sex and the City" television series on a whim, when a former film colleague called to ask him to be locations manager for the show in the late '90s.

"So all of a sudden here I am doing this show," Check said, laughing.

The making of the first season started in 1997. There are 12 episodes in Season 1, which Check refers to as the "experimental" season. One experiment that didn't last is when the actresses would turn their heads to the camera and share their thoughts. In the following seasons, Carrie's thoughts are voiced over the video.

During the first season, Check said, he remembers thinking, "Shows like this survive one season and that's it."

"No one anticipated what it would turn into," Check said. "The show has taken up 10 years of my life. I never would have imagined this."

But it was also the first season that defined the "arc" of each character - Carrie, the quirky newspaper columnist who writes about relationships; Charlotte, the big-hearted volunteer who always believes in love; Miranda, the hard-nosed lawyer who eventually has a baby; and Samantha, the outspoken publicist and "trysexual" who "will try anything once." That these characters are so different gave the writers "a lot to work with," Check said.

"They paired personalities against each other, and that's what grabbed everybody's attention," Check said. "That's the formula of the show that worked so well."

Director Michael Patrick King, who wrote the movie's script and multiple TV episodes, focused on writing about relationships. And of course there is a lot to look forward to in the movie - will Charlotte have a baby of her own? Will Carrie finally marry Mr. Big? Will these four women be as close in their 40s as they were in their 30s?

Meanwhile, Check said when he first started working on the film in July he thought it would be "the final chapter" of "Sex and the City."

"Can it survive after this? I don't know," Check said. "They're all in their 40s and where it started is a very different time than where it is now. I'm like, 'Go out on a high note!'"



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*A detail of the scale model of Carrie's apartment in the movie "Sex and the City" by Edward Check.*