

A gang of fairies becomes an Italian franchise

By Elisabetta Povoledo

ROME "This is going to be a Winx Christmas," said Franco Filutti, as he sorted through a carton of newly arrived model cars in his toy store in central Rome. "Winx are this year's phenomenon."

For the uninitiated, Winx are fairies, six comely — and fashionable — teenage fairies with a successful television series to their name and a good start on silver-screen stardom, and they happened to have been born and bred in Italy.

"Winx — The Secret of the Lost Kingdom," the first full-length movie featuring the fairies, was No. 1 at the Italian box office when it opened two week-

ends ago, just as truckloads of Winx Club-branded merchandise — dolls, purses, DVDs and so on — jump-started the pre-Christmas rush.

One oft-touted statistic: Winx, who first appeared on Italian television in 2004, outsold Barbie in Italy.

These days, Winx Club cartoons are shown on television in 130 countries, and merchandising has generated €1.5 billion in the past four years, said Iginio Straffi, founder of the Rainbow production company and the creator of the fairies.

Last year, Rainbow, based in a mid-size city in the Marche, on the Adriatic coast, posted a profit last year of €16 million, or \$22.5 million, he said.

Riding on that crest, Rainbow had

planned an initial public stock offering for this autumn.

It has been postponed to the new year "because now we're focusing on the film," Straffi said in an interview on the Via Veneto in Rome. "It would have been too much all at once, plus the stock market isn't too encouraging at the moment."

Cash from the stock offering could be used to finance expansion plans, like other feature films — one reason Straffi said he hoped this first film was a hit. It cost €25 million to make and involved

constructing a film studio in Rome specially designed for 3-D animation.

Although Italy is not known for its animated film industry, Straffi

said he believed that "it's positive to have another European alternative" to the animators in the United States and Japan. Those major film studios, he noted, "are not exactly welcoming us with open arms."

In the world of Winx, an ordinary human being discovers she has magical powers, goes to a special school in a magical kingdom where witchcraft is taught by a coterie of oddball teachers, and hooks up with other kids with magical powers to fight evil incarnated in various forms.

Sound familiar? Straffi shook his head at the suggestion that his trendy fairies were a cross between Harry Potter and the Spice Girls. "I'd say they

were more Charlie's Angels, except there are twice as many," he laughed.

And he pointed out that the Spice Girls had "no content," whereas the Winx Club exists in a complex and structured universe — so detailed as to have its own horoscope — that is expanded on the Internet at www.winxclub.com.

Straffi, who worked for comic book publishers and as a story board artist before founding Rainbow in 1995, concocted Winx after noticing that television cartoons airing at the end of the

1990s — like Pokemon or Dragon Ball — were geared to boys.

"I gambled that there was room for a series for girls," he said. "From the business point of view, the Winx Club was conceived as something big from the outset."

Paola Dubini, who teaches business administration at Bocconi University in Milan and has studied the rise of the company, said, "It was all well designed to make it visible, and very early on they had merchandising."

Giving the fairies defined and differ-

ent personalities that allow children to identify with specific characters was also a smart move, Dubini said.

"The merchandising was diversified to create a loyalty effect, which with kids this age is very important," she said.

The fairies are also designed to appeal to parents, too.

"They're beautiful but smart — they take initiatives," Dubini said. "So working mothers are happy because they show you can be a pretty girl and be strong as a personality. It's a nice message. If my daughter were whining, I'd rather give her a Winx than some other doll."

Since Straffi has been able to merge his creative streak with business acumen, he has been frequently compared to Walt Disney, at least in the Italian press.

Still, fame can be fleeting, especially if your target is a young child with commercially pliable taste.

Straffi's vision for Rainbow remains large.

"I wanted to create a brand, not a fleeting phenomenon," said Straffi, who has created several other less successful animated series and is now working on a new television series aimed at young boys.

"I'm looking to create a lifestyle brand, where kids eat with our products at breakfast, brush their teeth with our toothbrushes, play with our games and then go to sleep wearing our pajamas and our sheets," he said.

"This is the type of approach that assures longevity."



A scene from "Winx — The Secret of the Lost Kingdom," which was produced by Rainbow. Winx Club-branded merchandise includes dolls, purses and DVDs.