

Superheroes for the little ones

A conversation with Josh Selig*

The word “superhero” conjures a particular image in the popular imagination: a solitary, secretive figure – often male – who uses supernatural powers or advanced technology to fight crime. Their superheroic efforts can be somewhat vengeful, rooted in a desire to right some personal wrong outside the law, and they are often perceived as outsiders in their societies.

In children’s culture, however, mediated superheroes are less secretive, less vengeful, and more likely to be female. Key examples include *The Powerpuff Girls*, laboratory-created girls who work in a team with their mayor’s approval, and *Kim Possible*, a cheerleader who uses high-tech gadgets and a network of friends to fight crime. Unlike, say, Batman, these superheroes seem approachable. Who wouldn’t want to be friends with Powerpuff Girls?

Recently, Little Airplane Productions has brought an even sweeter form of superheroism to the preschool set. Their hit animated series *The Wonder Pets!* features 3 classroom animals who don capes and become superheroes whenever their telephone rings. The show was originally pitched to NICK Jr. as *The Super Singing Power Pets*, which underscored 3 important things: The show is about pets, and they are superheroes, and they like to sing. I asked Josh Selig, creator of *The Wonder Pets!*, to share his perspective on the superheroism and other innovations presented in his show.

What is the concept behind *The Wonder Pets!*?

The Wonder Pets! began as a series of interstitials for NICK Jr. It was originally called *Linny the Guinea Pig*, in which Linny took two trips: under the ocean and into space. Those were animated without any dialogue to two pieces of music by Tchaikovsky, and they ran on NICK Jr. for quite a while. Because of the success of those shorts, we went into development on a longer-form series that would include Linny as the star and would also use the “photo-puppetry” style of animation that Jennifer Oxley, Creative Director of Little Airplane Productions (see sidebar), created. We wanted to build on Linny’s character, classical music, and photo-puppetry to create a whole new series.

I came up with the idea of having two other classroom pets – Turtle Tuck and Ming-Ming Duckling – work with Linny, almost like superheroes. But it was important to me that these superheroes not have any superpowers – that they are like a preschooler in that they couldn’t do anything extraordinary, but when they work together, they do great things.

How do you reconcile the *Wonder Pets!* brand of heroism with the broader idea of what a superhero is?

Younger children like to look up to characters that can do things that regular people can’t do, but there is something very empowering for them to see 3 characters who have a limited skill set, in the way that most preschoolers do, who are able to combine those skills through teamwork to accomplish amazing things. In a sense, this makes the preschoolers feel that they too could be a superhero. Not that they would have to be able to lift heavy things, or stretch out in the way that some superheroes might do.

In a way, the *Wonder Pets!* are more grounded than traditional superheroes, but that allows for greater identification between the preschoolers and our main characters.

In what other ways does *The Wonder Pets!* address the needs of preschool viewers?

In terms of our curriculum, we emphasise teamwork and creative problem-solving. We decided early on we wanted to focus on those two things very closely in every episode. So it is not as broad a curriculum as some shows have, but we feel that by hitting those points over and over, those themes resonate with young kids. Kids actually do pick up the signature songs, they all know how to sing, “What’s gonna work? Teamwork!” I find that it has helped them understand these very basic ideas.

Linny, Tuck, and Ming-Ming are nearly androgynous. What is your philosophy on gender depictions?

We have always felt that Linny is a girl character, although young boys often will consider Linny to be a boy. It is just the child wanting to identify with the hero. The same thing was found on *Blue’s Clues*, where boys thought Blue was a boy and girls thought Blue was a girl. Linny is not all that specific in her design. We just tried to stay true to what a guinea pig was, so it wasn’t important to us to make her particularly anthropomorphised or feminine. The same is true with Ming-Ming and Tuck. It is not something we give a lot of thought to, and I wanted just to make sure that we didn’t have any kind of stereotypical character traits for any of them.

My sense is that when it comes to marketing to children, things are more stratified into boy’s toys and girl’s toys. But with TV shows, you

Photo-Puppetry Animation

I understand that in developing characters for *The Wonder Pets!*, you photograph baby animals and you “cute-ify” them digitally, making their heads and eyes bigger. Then they are animated in a puppet-like fashion. How did you come up with this idea?

Jennifer Oxley: When Josh pitched the idea of interstitials about *Linny the Guinea Pig*, the idea was to use photos of real animals. But how would they move? That’s where I came in, and it definitely was a challenge. People have done animation with moving photos before, where you really can tell that they look very cut out, and you can see the popping positions. I wanted to set up a style where they felt real.

For Linny, we brought in a guinea pig, and we took photographs from every angle – basically, anything that we could think of that we would need to animate. Then we used picture editing software to cut them out, and to add the fur. Actually, all the fur was painted by hand so that it had a really soft, fluffy quality. Then we layered all these pieces like a paper doll would be constructed, almost like a puppet. Finally, when they are brought into the software After Effects, we move them around in time to the music and the dialogue.

I wanted the characters to feel like animals the kids knew. I wanted them to feel soft, and their movements to be very smooth and fluid. There is a little cartoony-ness to them, but I wanted them to be grounded in reality.

Jennifer Oxley is the Creative Director of Little Airplane Productions in New York, NY, USA.

want boys and girls to find something they enjoy about the show.

I enjoy that each episode of *The Wonder Pets!* is its own operetta, featuring original compositions. How did you come up with this concept?

For me, the use of Tchaikovsky in the shorts was compelling. The kids and their parents enjoyed it. I kept struggling with how to keep that in a long-form show, where we needed the characters to speak and have storylines and conflict. When I was think-

ing about the pilot – where they save the baby penguin on the iceberg – it occurred to me that it would be cute if suddenly the baby penguin, instead of speaking, sang the words, “Thank you for com-iiing. You’re all so ni-iiice.” Literally this line was the key to the entire series. Once I felt that would be a charming way to communicate dialogue, I thought, rather than doing a song here and there, what if we just sang the whole thing, beginning to end?

I’m not an opera person. I can’t say that I have a lot of exposure to it, and in a certain sense I think that’s helped me in writing it, because I have a very childlike conception of what opera is. On the other hand, the composers that we bring in to help us execute these scripts are very sophisticated. When that is supported by the orchestra, who are top-of-the-line talent, you get this mix of this charming, young, animals singing with high-quality music underneath. ■



* A short version of a conversation of Dr. Rebecca Hains with Josh Selig, founder and president of Little

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