

Dino Dan: “Creating excitement for the world”

A conversation with J.J. Johnson and Christin Simms*

How did Dino Dan start?

J.J.: Well, truthfully it started with Daniel Cook, our 5-year-old protagonist in the show *This is Daniel Cook* ... The first time I met him, the one thing that he said was that he wanted to be a paleontologist. Then, after we had shot about 130 different adventures with him – and he was in planes, a helicopter pilot, absolutely everything under the sun – he still wanted to be a paleontologist. What struck me was that through all these adventures, dinosaurs still held strong for him. I think, for kids, what’s great about dinosaurs, is that there are still discoveries to be made, we don’t know everything yet. So there’s this wild possibility that they could grow up and find a new one.

Within a conversation we were talking about that our next show should be about dinosaurs, which got me thinking: “If we were to do a dinosaur show, what would it be, and how would it be different from what is out there currently?”

A lot of the dinosaur shows have dinosaurs talking or being playful. But whenever I talk to kids and ask them the thing that they love about them, it is that they are scary. I think that’s kidspeak for they are exciting, massive, freaky creatures running around. So we want it to be as true to what kids really like about the dinosaurs as we possibly could. We also wanted to put them into real-world situations. If it says they had the length of a

school bus, show it against a school bus, rather than showing them in prehistoric times, where you can never really get their full scale; to see them up against the house, or running beside a car, really gives you an idea of just how big they were (cf. ill. 1).

What is the basic idea of Dino Dan?

J.J.: At its core, it is a show about a little boy who loves dinosaurs so much that he imagines them into the real world. I think it is playful, and it is just trying to show you that there is this whole other world that existed before us with these giant creatures that were magical. Imagine you as a young kid being on the planet for 48 months and somebody tells you: “Oh, by the way, there were these giant prehistoric creatures that were here 160 million years ago, and they were the size of your house. Then one day a giant asteroid from space crashed into the planet and blew up everything. They all melted, and some of them stayed around and became birds.” It is such a mind-blowing concept for kids and adults alike. I think we’re really fortunate to be able to present a show that opens up kids’ minds a bit to how cool and weird this planet of ours is.



Ill. 1: Dan is looking at a dinosaur that is as big as a house

Do you have any educational intentions with the show?

Simms: It really is about creating excitement for the world. It is about going out and exploring. In this show, it is about exploring science and the past, and having a connection. That would be the overall aim for the show; and in each episode we focus on a specific thing about the dinosaur.

So first of all it should be a story that engages children, that fosters fantasy and shows that it is great to have a rich imaginary world. If they learn some dinosaur facts and if it fosters curiosity and the “learning to learn”, that is, of course, appreciated, too. But it is really first and foremost a great story for kids.

J.J.: I think what we try to do is not underestimate the audience’s almost intrinsic knowledge of dinosaurs. We did a few meetings at schools before we actually started shooting, just to get a general sense of how much kids knew about dinosaurs. It was a



Ill. 2-3: Different dinosaur types with and without feathers play a central role in the stories

preschool class and I think a kindergarten class. Their knowledge was insane. They could list at least 6 or 7 dinosaurs; they knew some cool facts about each. So when we started the show we really decided that we wouldn't be describing what a dinosaur is. We would right away jump in: it is a given fact that the audience knows what a dinosaur is, and now we are going to get into some cool stuff like: were they warm-blooded, how they hunted, how they defended themselves. But then we knew that kids could handle a deeper science than maybe some other shows would do.

As adults we grew up with dinosaur pictures of e.g. Jurassic Park or BBC's Walking with Dinosaurs – these dinosaurs look different, why?

Simms: Most dinosaurs in textbooks, in paleontology books, are brown, green, or kind of muddy looking. We really wanted something a little bit more kid-friendly, but we obviously wanted it to be based in science. So, we realized that a lot of dinosaurs lived in tropical climates, and that we could take our inspirations from tropical amphibians, frogs, lizards, and that kind of thing.

J.J.: Paleontologists found melatonin which was something that was in the

skin that proved that dinosaurs were more colorful, or at least had the potential to be colorful. We went back and forth with experts at The Tyrrell Museum in Alberta which is the largest museum dedicated to dinosaurs in North America and with paleontologists at the ROM, another museum in Toronto. At the end what we found most exciting is that nothing is locked in stone. They are constantly changing their minds about their discoveries. We are taking some liberties with that. I think as time has gone by, and they are starting to find fossils of feathers and things like that, there is a better appreciation that dinosaurs were probably more colorful than we thought they were.

How close do you work together with scientists?

Simms: Well, we usually start with a longer conversation with our experts at The Tyrrell Museum.

J.J.: Everything gets reviewed. So, from the initial story idea to each script it goes to The Tyrrell who checks every piece of information in it. So, when those episodes come out, they are the latest that they could possibly be on the information presented.

What were the coolest facts you found out about dinosaurs?

Simms: My number one shocking fact was that the T-Rex might not actually have hunted. It might have been a scavenger. Look at the massive T-Rex. How is that possible? But, it was so big that it might not have moved as quickly as it did in *Jurassic Park*. We did an episode about how it might have been a scavenger. In the end, we conclude that it did both: scavenge and hunt. But still, it was a little disappointing to think that this massive, crazy dinosaur with banana-size teeth was just a scavenger.

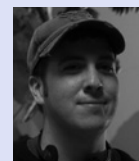
J.J.: I think the one that blew me away too was that dinosaurs predominantly were warm-blooded. So that idea of them being a cold-blooded reptile is completely untrue. It really starts to

give more credibility that they really are related with birds. I also think the amount of dinosaurs that have feathers was kind of shocking, especially in this season (cf. ill. 2-3). Like more and more of them have feathers, which is just kind of cool.

And the fact that the Stegosaurus might have changed the colors of its plates to show off how it was feeling is just a crazy idea – that it was kind of like a chameleon.

How do you make clear that what you are telling is the truth or could be the truth?

J.J.: I think we are very sensitive that if it is not locked down, then we will say it is a theory. We were reading somewhere online that dinosaurs may have farted themselves into extinction. Honestly, as soon as we read that, we were like: “Clearly we are doing an episode on it”. Even though most people don't believe that is true, but it was such a funny idea that it was even suggested. So we did an episode, and it is very clear throughout that this is only one of the theories of how dinosaurs became extinct. But, I think, if I am a kid – just that idea that maybe it wasn't a meteor, maybe they did actually fart themselves into extinction, it is so awesome and mind-blowing. Just to suggest that there is some level of debate in that. I think we are exceptionally careful that if it is not a proven fact or that the majority believe it, we are clear in the story that it is just a theory. ■



*A short version of a conversation with J.J. Johnson and Christin Simms, creators of *Dino Dan*, Sinking Ship Entertainment, Toronto, Canada.