



# Smash! Bang! Ka-Pow!

*Team Smithereen*, an energetic new series of shorts which is described as *Mr. Bill-meets-Jackass*, has a whole lot of fun mixing the world of puppets with animation and real stunts. **by Ramin Zahed**

Those who have fond memories of that insane team of pain-loving stunt-crazy guys on MTV's *Jackass* will certainly get a kick out of *Team Smithereen*, a new puppet/animation hybrid series created by Dan Clark, Don Asher and Dave Pressler. Produced by The Dan Clark Company, WILDBRAIN and Jetix, the 26-part series of short vignettes revolves around a pain-defying band of foam latex puppets, shot in high def and animated in post (via India's Paprikaas Animation Studios).

We were fortunate enough to visit Clark and company a few weeks ago, as they were shooting an episode

which pays homage to Disney's much-loved classic movie, *Tron*. Working out of a spacious house in the Los Feliz hills neighborhood of Los Angeles, the *Team Smithereen* crew is totally jazzed about creating a fun new show that is bursting with a mad vibe of color and creativity.



credit: Don Asher

"We are shooting the show like an indie movie," says Clark, who has worked on a long list of award-winning shows (*Yo Gabba Gabba*, *B.R.A.T.S. of the Lost Nebula*, *The Save-Ums!*). "It's down and dirty—and it's done by a small team of about 15 enthusiastic people."

Clark explains that the show's main characters—Brave Little Francis, Whoop, Thrill Cat and Stunt Pig—are latex puppets, whose eyes are later animated by the team in India. "The show is modeled after animation—we experiment with squash and stretch effects—but the action is photo-realistic. We shoot all the stunts in real-time and none of them are CG. We actually shoot them in high def in the real world." He adds with a laugh, "Oh, and we're really big on ripping their skins off!"

According to Clark, the origins of the show go all the way back to 2003 when he and his partners were using a big

house in the Hollywood Hills as a production center. "We had just finished the second season of *Save-Ums!* and had lost the Daytime Emmy to *The Batman*, so we found a hollow puppet and filled it with a mixture of baked beans and jello," he recalls. "We're all men in our 40s, but we got a big kick of dropping a stone on the

puppet and taping it and playing it all back in slow-mo. It was really reminiscent of the old Fleischer cartoons!"

When Jetix and WILDBRAIN expressed interest in the show's premise, the team knew that they were on to something that could push the envelope to a certain degree. "We loved *Team Smithereen* from the moment we first saw it, for a bunch of reasons," says Marc Buhaj, senior VP of programming at Jetix Europe. "It has a unique style, and great high-impact comedy in a 'snack size' format ... One big stunt per episode, one big wipeout you'll never forget, and one OMG moment you'll tell all your friends about. Second, the characters were brilliantly designed and immediately endearing. Finally, the style and technique are uniquely suited to this kind of action. The characters are still basically cartoons, but they are also



**Danger Zone:** Series co-creator Dan Clark (left) and puppeteer Sean Johnson come up with many insane ways to challenge their eager, crash-test puppets.

credit Felix Pire



Dan Clark directs puppeteers Felix Pire and Russ Walko while filming "Thrill Kat's Bad Science Stunt."

credit Sean Johnson

real, physical, vinyl puppets that wipe-out in all sorts of very real ways. We really feel the splat, the crash, the shattering into a million tiny pieces. Of course they are always OK in the end, and always come back for more!"

WILDBRAIN's head of creative Bob Higgins also shares Buhaj's enthusiasm. "I think that just the basic idea makes you laugh," he says. "It's completely left of center, irreverent and fresh. I had never seen this particular look with these kind of characters and this sensibility in one package before. Plus, it's artistic and creative-driven and something that we can do without breaking the bank. Also, it's very Internet-friendly because of its 90-second length. We're hoping to build it up slowly, as it has all the makings of a cool viral hit."

While the execs are coming up with new ways of building word-of-mouth about the show, the creative team continues to experiment with the puppets in various calamitous environments. They've actually shot poor little Francis trying to drink from a cow's udder at a local dairy and even experimented with Nitrogen explosions in Coke bottles!

"One of the great things about the show is that the designs have a real tangible quality to them. Our goal is to have the show inspire kids all over America to make their own home versions of



the show in their backyard," says Clark as his eyes light up with a certain level of mischief. Let's just hope they'll leave the helpless cows out of it! ■

**You can visit the show's production blog at [teamsmithereen.blogspot.com](http://teamsmithereen.blogspot.com). Jetix plans to air the shorts in the first quarter of 2009.**