

'Dinosaur Train' brings a big adventure to Mendel



Stage adaptation of the kids' TV show features larger-than-life puppets

By **JEREMY D. BONFIGLIO**
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BENTON HARBOR — Bringing an animated television show to the theatrical stage always has its challenges.

For John Tartaglia, the director/producer behind "Dinosaur Train Live! Buddy's Big Adventure," the trickiest obstacle was recreating a cast of characters that includes a young Tyrannosaurus Rex and his adopted Pteranodon family.

"We were really passionate about not taking the easy route," Tartaglia says by telephone from Florida during a break in production. "One of the challenges with 'Dinosaur Train' is the animators made them very true to the proportions of the actual dinosaurs they were based on. They have long necks and skinny arms, which meant it wouldn't work just putting a human in a costume."

IF YOU GO

► **WHAT:** "Dinosaur Train Live! Buddy's Big Adventure"

► **WHEN:** 11 a.m. and 2 p.m. Saturday

► **WHERE:** Lake Michigan College Mendel Center Mainstage, 2755 E. Napier Ave., Benton Harbor

► **HOW MUCH:** \$15-\$26

► **CONTACT:** 927-1221 or www.lmcmainstage.org

► **ARTIST INFO:** www.dinosaurtrainlive.com

Instead, the production team turned to The Jim Henson Company to create hybrid puppeteered costumed characters so Buddy, Tiny and Don looked like the same creatures that pop off the screen in the PBS Kids series. The result is a show that seems, well, larger than life.

"When a kid comes to the show, these characters really are their friends," says Tartaglia, who

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Photo provided
"Dinosaur Train Live! Buddy's Big Adventure" will have shows at 11 a.m. and 2 p.m. Saturday at Lake Michigan College's Mendel Center Mainstage.

DINOSAUR TRAIN

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brings “Dinosaur Train Live! Buddy’s Big Adventure” to Lake Michigan College’s Mendel Center for two Saturday matinee performances. “So we came up with this hybrid where the puppeteer can bring the character to life and the character looks exactly like it would on television. It’s given us a way to really stay true to the character.”

For example, the character of The Conductor (Kirk Bixby), in some ways is a traditional hand puppet with the puppeteer wearing part of the costume in front of him. Buddy (Drew Torkelson) and Tiny (Mindy Leanse) are more worn pieces where the puppeteers have control of the mouth

and the lip synch, but there are rods attached to arms and legs to control hands and feet. Then there’s King (Chris Palmieri), at 18 feet tall, which is partially inflated and also attached to a boom.

There’s also a lush projected backgrounds, special effects, and a full-sized replica of the Dinosaur Train.

“The most important thing to us was to keep it as true to show as possible,” Tartaglia says.

Written by Craig Bartlett, the creator of the animated series, “Dinosaur Train Live! Buddy’s Big Adventure” follows Little Buddy, a proud Tyrannosaurus Rex living happily in the Pteranodon family who worries just what will happen when he gets bigger and can’t fit in the nest anymore. So the Pteranodons

decide to hop aboard the Dinosaur Train for an adventure across the Mesozoic to take Buddy to see his good friend King Cryolophosaurus, who is giving a concert in Troodon Town.

When they arrive, King is missing. Will Buddy and the gang be able to find him in time for his concert? And will Buddy discover what makes him special and such an important part of the Pteranodon family?

“Our goal was to capture what makes the show so special on television, but find a way to bring it theatrically to audiences across the country,” Tartaglia says. “It’s very interactive and I think it’s something people have not seen before, certainly not brought to life this way before.”

The 35-year-old Tartaglia

should know. He’s been working in the industry since he was 16 years old after joining Sesame Street’s puppetry team, performing as a right hand and many minor characters, including Phoebe and being the understudy for Kevin Clash’s Elmo.

“To be working on ‘Sesame Street’ was a very mind twisty thing,” Tartaglia says. “I remember one of my first days, doing a scene with Maria and Luis. I knew her as Maria my whole life, but her real name is Sonia Manzano. I just could not call her Sonia. I kept calling her Maria all day.”

Tartaglia went on to perform Ernie for the second season of “Play with Me Sesame” and Oscar the Grouch for “Sesame Street 4D.” He also created and

puppeteered the roles of Princeton (the recent college grad) and Rod (the closeted Republican investment banker) in the Tony Award-winning Broadway musical “Avenue Q.” And earlier this year he was cast as the new puppeteer for Gobo Fraggle of “Fraggle Rock,” replacing Jerry Nelson, who died in 2012.

“I grew up with ‘Fraggle Rock’ in the ’80s, so I still feel like I’m holding a holy object with Gobo because Jerry to me was and is a hero,” Tartaglia says. “I’m the biggest ‘Fraggle Rock’ fan in the world but I was conflicted because it should be Jerry. I’m just trying to capture as much of the essence of Gobo as possible.”

In addition to “Fraggle Rock” and bringing “Dinosaur Train” to the stage,

Tartaglia will also bring another PBS Kids show, “Sid The Science Kid,” to the stage next year, and is creating two other shows he “can’t talk about yet.”

“I have my hands in a lot of different puppets,” he says, laughing. “It’s been a busy time, but I’m grateful.”

With that gratitude, he says, comes some perspective of just who he is performing for, which is why he and his team have taken such care in bringing “Dinosaur Train” to life.

“We know that for many kids this will be their first live show,” Tartaglia says. “We want them to want to come back to the theater. We want it to be pretty special. And it is. I’m proud of it.”

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