

# Award for Outstanding Achievement **Walking with Dinosaurs** **The Live Experience**

## *(T-)Rex Appeal*



by Martin Palicki

As the lights dim in the arena, the crowd quiets and turns its attention to the giant curtains at the far end. Out walks the only human being the audience will see for the next 90 minutes. His name is Huxley, paleontologist and tour guide for the show. He looks to be about 35. The rest of the cast is much older. Millions of years older.

Before long, the first stars of WALKING WITH DINOSAURS – THE LIVE EXPERIENCE make their way onto the stage. As Huxley explains how dinosaurs came into being, several smaller dinos, portrayed by actors wearing extensive costumes, appear. But they are only the first and smallest of the production's prehistoric entourage.

Ten species are represented from the entire 200 million year reign of the dinosaurs. The show includes the Tyrannosaurus Rex, the terror of the ancient terrain, as well as the Plateosaurus and Liliensternus from the Triassic period, the Stegosaurus and Allosaurus from the Jurassic period and Torosaurus and Utahraptor from the awesome Cretaceous. The largest of them, the Brachiosaurus, is 36 feet tall, and 56 feet from nose to tail.

Most are huge lumbering creatures that actually "walk" across the arena floor. The "walking" is accomplished via small battery-powered scooter cabs, one for each creature and barely large enough for the driver seated inside. The cabs are camouflaged and unobtrusive. They also power the dinosaurs'

legs and feet, which move in a fluid and realistic motion.

Maintaining a sense of authenticity was vital for the show's creative team of Malcolm Cooke and William May. The production is based on the BBC-produced cultural phenomenon Walking With Dinosaurs television series, which was renowned for its realism.

It took May two years to figure out how to actually create the dinosaurs in such a way as to make them transportable, yet still realistic. The idea came to May while he was waiting at a train station one morning. Two cranes were set up washing windows on a large building, and their profiles resembled a pair of Brachiosauruses munching on leaves. From there, May assembled a team of over 50 professionals to transform his revelation into reality.

"Once we had a basic design," explains May, "my role was to encourage the team to take

ownership and excitement in the project." May selected Sonny Tilders, one of the major creative forces of the high-tech world of animatronic puppetry for film and television, to lead the development of the dinosaurs.

"To make it appear that these creatures are flesh and blood weighing six-, eight- or even 20- tons, we use a system called 'muscle bags,' made from stretch mesh fabric and filled with polystyrene balls, stretched across moving points on the body," explained Tilders. "These contract and stretch in the same manner that muscle, fat, and skin does on real creatures."

While Tilders and his team worked on the dinos, May perfected the script, which progresses chronologically through the prehistoric periods. Thanks to a stroke of evolutionary luck, the dinosaurs presented keep getting larger and more awe-inspiring, culminating with the intimidating Tyrannosaurus Rex. Both Tilders and May admit that a dinosaur show without a T-Rex



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would be pretty hard to sell, but the other characters are equally as compelling.

Take the Pterodactyl, which swoops in to glide above the clouds while a projected landscape trails off behind its wings. Or the Brachiosaurus, whose extended neck allows the beast to peer out over the audience while those in the first few rows grip their seats and wonder if the animal is carnivorous.

This is one of the moments where parents in the audience start turning to their children, who immediately begin informing mom or dad of the dinosaur's name, reassure them of its eating habits, and offer other factoids. While May acknowledges that some children are afraid to come into the arena, one of their goals was to provide an environment where children could interact with their parents. May, a Brooklyn native whose parents worked hard to take the whole family to Broadway shows regularly, understood that they needed to create an entire experience that appealed to everyone.

"It starts with the commercial the family sees on TV, which stimulates the kids to talk about the dinosaurs they have studied in school," explains May. "Once they get to the arena, they aren't quite sure what to expect, but after the show a lot of kids come up to me and ask 'How long have you owned the T-Rex? Where does he live? Can I come to your house?' That's how we know the show has been successful."

That success did not come easily, nor does it continue to happen without a lot of help. While each dino has a driver inside piloting

the creature around the arena, in a space above the arena dubbed the Voodoo Lounge, two puppeteers for each dinosaur control the remainder of the beast's actions, including its facial expressions, tail swings and neck movement, all via remote control. The puppeteers above and the drivers in the arena are in constant communication to keep the movement as fluid and natural as possible.

The coordination is crucial, and the result is nothing short of amazing. "Up until now, dinosaurs have been very much confined to the virtual world," claims Tilders. "In an entertainment world dominated by the flat screen, our show takes that extra leap and brings these creatures to life in a very real and tactile way."

It's exactly that presence - that awareness of history, of evolution, and the reality of those awe-inspiring creatures that roamed the planet - that can spark a productive, educational dialogue among families.

"We're glad the show gets kids and their parents talking about science, nature and history," explained May, "because then we know they will continue that conversation and fascination long after the last dinosaur walks offstage."

*NOTE: WALKING WITH DINOSAURS – THE LIVE EXPERIENCE came to life at Sydney's Acer Arena in January 2007. The show proved such a sensation that the North American tour was fast-tracked, and began a scant three months after completing its engagements in Australia. As of this writing the N.A. tour was booked to continue at least through April 2008.*



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