

The STORYTELLER

Jim Henson's unusual animatronic fairy tale pilot has spawned a series of specials to begin on NBC in November.

By Alan Jones

After winning both critical and public acclaim with their half-hour television fantasy pilot *THE STORYTELLER*, telecast last January on NBC, executive producer Jim Henson began production on four more segments at the beginning of August, to be aired as a series of specials, beginning on NBC in November. Henson plans to shoot four more episodes next year.

The base of operations for the Henson Associates, Inc. fairy tale series is North London's Lee International Studios where Barbra Streisand filmed *YENTL*. John Hurt, star of *ALIEN*, *THE ELEPHANT MAN*, and 1984, will again undergo a two-hour makeup stint each day as the featured narrator for the series—a TVS production in association with Henson. TVS is a British independent television company based in the South of England. Henson's Creature Shop will build and operate all the animatronic puppets required for the prestige series. Brian Froud, the conceptual designer of *THE DARK CRYSTAL*, *LABYRINTH*, and the pilot shot last August, is not returning for the series due to commitments on his own projects.

The executive in charge of production for *THE STORYTELLER* is 37 year-old Duncan Kenworthy, who joined the Henson group in 1979 and moved to New York. Henson had been impressed with Kenworthy's supervision of the preparation of the Arab television version of *SESAME STREET* and asked him to be associate producer on *THE DARK CRYSTAL*—an offer Kenworthy didn't refuse because he had been waiting for an

opportunity to move back to London. A television show based on traditional fairy tales seems like an obvious format to showcase the talents of the Henson Organization. Kenworthy explained why *THE STORYTELLER* took so long to come about.

"Jim Henson has always been keen on doing the less obvious," said Kenworthy. "When he realized there was something that hadn't been done before with fairy tales, he got interested. Strangely enough, the series idea came about because his daughter, Lisa, now a vice-president in charge of development at Warner Bros, had been a folklore major at Harvard. She said to him one morning, 'You know you really should be doing something with

imagination—and what is the modern equivalent of storytelling?' The answer, of course is rock videos," said Kenworthy. "In a strange way the music track is the story backbone, but the images don't stick to a form, they jump about with ideas triggered from the lyrics. We thought of using very striking images that don't follow the narrative conventions of establishing shots and intercutting to try something unusual. This rock video approach—without the rock—led to the hiring of rock video director Steve Barron (*ELECTRIC DREAMS*) to do the pilot.

Though Kenworthy said that the creations of the Creature Shop are now "viable for television presentation," the emphasis on the animatronic characters in the pi-



John Hurt as *THE STORYTELLER*, and his animatronic dog. The series of half-hour specials premieres on NBC in November. Hurt's makeup has been simplified (inset) to speed production.

fairy tales, treating them as they ought to be done, like oral literature.' No one's ever done it before. People have only taken the stories and ransacked them for dramatic incident, losing what makes them special—the words and the sound of a man's voice telling a tale and invoking a host of images. That made the idea suddenly very special for Henson. We talked about it, because my background is also in literature, and I cottoned to the concept immediately and found it very exciting. So we pushed it from the back to the front burner on our list of projects to tackle."

Since the concept of filming a storyteller relating a story lacked visual impact, Henson and Kenworthy's first task was to come up with a format to visualize the medium's oral traditions in an interesting and unusual way. They began by asking themselves what effect hearing a story has on an audience—it stimulates the imagi-



HANS, MY HEDGEHOG, the pilot shown last January, featured the animatronic characters created by Jim Henson's Creature Shop: Hans (above) and stern father (right), astride a chicken. The series will present lesser known tales, retaining oral traditions.



lot—and in the forthcoming series—is less than one might expect, due to budgetary considerations. Because of long development, set-up and filming schedules required for Creature Shop characters, they don't come cheap. Because the pilot was budgeted so expensively—Kenworthy wouldn't discuss figures—Henson has pursued deficit financing on the series. Production funds from both NBC and TVS don't cover costs, but Henson plans to recoup his investment and make a profit with sales to other overseas TV networks. "We're not talking here of AMAZING STORIES budgets," said Kenworthy. "If only we had the money Spielberg had."

Actually, Kenworthy sees the judicious use of the animatronics as being to the show's benefit. "I feel the show has much more impact because we aren't trying to tell a creature tale but a human tale in which creatures are only a part," he said. "The balance between actors and creatures makes it easier to do the effects in a better way because they aren't focused on as the prime factor. You can do a throwaway scene, like the hedgehog baby in the pilot, which took a great deal of time to perfect and perform. You only show it for ten seconds and it registers as such a strong lasting image because you don't see more."

The "Hans, My Hedgehog" pilot took seven ten-hour shooting days to film. Kenworthy has shortened the schedule further for the series to six days. "I'm hoping the experience gained on the pilot will stand us in good stead and make everything much more efficient," he said, somewhat nervously. "NBC originally wanted THE STORYTELLER to be a weekly series but

it was a collective decision to change it to a series of specials. We just knew we wouldn't be able to do it on that basis."

The show is shot in 35mm and transferred to video for post-production. Like the pilot, the series will be scripted by Anthony Minghella, who only recently began writing for television. The show won't use well-known fairy tales like "Cinderella" or "Sleeping Beauty." Among the episodes slated for production are "A Story Short," which features storyteller John Hurt more integrally, when he is unable to recall one of his tales, and "The Luckchild," a combination of three Rumanian folk tales about a child prophesized to inherit a kingdom. Directors set for the first four segments include Jon

Amiel, who won major plaudits for the Dennis Potter television mini-series THE SINGING DETECTIVE, Steve Barron, Charles Sturridge of BRIDESHEAD REVISITED fame, and Jim Henson.

"Since the pilot was so well received, many directors are coming to us," said Kenworthy. "Nic Roeg has said he'd love to do an episode. Mike Redford too, thanks to the John Hurt 1984 association. Neil Jordan has expressed an interest as well. Directors seem to find the show attractive. They only involve a short amount of time and they work with members of a creative field many of them are tantalized by. It's almost like the early days of THE MUPPET SHOW when top stars would beg to be guests." □