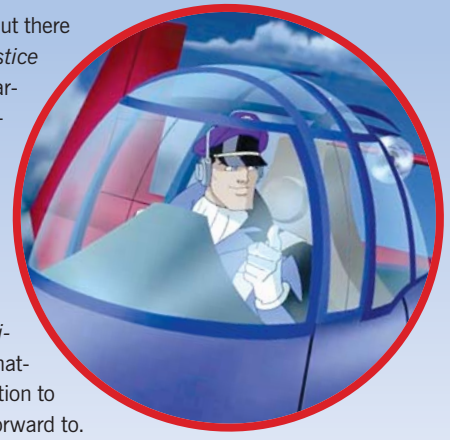


DIRECTOR DAN RIBA TALKS THE 20TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE ANIMATED JUSTICE LEAGUE.

BY JAMES GARTLER

It may seem hard to believe given the current state of the DC cinematic universe, but there once was an extremely uncontroversial, highly satisfying adaptation of DC's *Justice League* that everyone could agree hit all the sweet spots. Well, most of them, anyway. Cartoon Network's animated series dealt with its fair share of challenges, as Series Director Dan Riba is the first to point out, but the show successfully weathered the storm of audience expectations, licensing snafus and animation slip-ups to deliver two seasons of action-packed and heartstring-tugging adventure. Twenty years (and one failed live-action film adaptation) later, the question remains: how exactly did his team manage to get the *Justice League* just right?



"It was kind of like eating the world's largest pizza—you take it one bite at a time," he says with a chuckle. Having already won acclaim for their work on *Batman: The Animated Series*, *Superman: The Animated Series*, and *Batman Beyond*, it seemed only natural that the capable crew at Warner Bros. Animation would eventually turn their attention to DC's "Big Seven", but as Riba reveals, it wasn't a task they were necessarily looking forward to.

"We always dreaded the idea of it ... and we were right to be scared," he admits. "We knew how hard it was just to make *Superman* work, so the whole *Justice League* concept seemed impossible." Early in its development, however, the *Superman* series was actually conceived as a type of *Justice League* show. "Initially what [Series Producer] Bruce Timm thought was, 'Superman's been done a million times. I don't know how to make this fresh. Let's make it easier for ourselves and just do *Superman and the Justice League* and do a rotational thing,' so there'd be a focus on him, but



he might not be in every episode," Riba recalls. "He did an initial run of character designs for that, but DC and WB said 'no, we do this in stages. We want to focus on Superman.' The thought that this was a possibility had already been planted in our heads, though."

A few years later, when production on *S:TAS* and *BB* wrapped up, Timm once again revisited the idea, but by that point, executives at Kids WB had a more narrow view of what would appeal to their key demographics. "The network didn't seem to buy anything that didn't involve teenagers or children, so Bruce, [Designer] James Tucker and [Editor] Joe Gall cobbled together a bunch of clips from *Batman* and *Superman* and reanimated sequences to make a short video with a heavy focus on sidekicks. And then, it turned out that Cartoon Network was interested in exactly the kind of show they were interested in, so they didn't have to sell it to Kids WB."

Scrapping the idea of a sidekick-heavy League suited the creative team just fine, but they would still have to wait and see if rights to the specific superheroes they wanted for their core cast could be secured. "It was really weird to have to negotiate individually for each character like it was a baseball team," Riba observes. "Each character has its own agent essentially, so you first have to figure out if a character is being tied to any other project." They nearly had to use warrior woman Big Barda in place of Wonder Woman simply because negotiations with the estate of her creator, William Moulton Marston, played out until the 11th hour. "There was a real celebration when we got Wonder Woman because it was down to the wire and the show was already starting to be developed."

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With their main cast locked-in, they settled on a format. In each two-part *JL* story, Wonder Woman (Susan Eisenberg), Batman (Kevin Conroy), and Superman (George Newbern) would charge into battle alongside the Flash (Michael Rosenbaum), who had already made an appearance on *S:TAS*; Martian Manhunter (Carl Lumbly), whose origin story would be the focus of the pilot episodes; and two unexpected choices: African American Green Lantern John Stewart (Phill LaMarr) and Hawkman love interest Hawkgirl (Maria Canals). Aquaman, who had traditionally been a main member of the team, would be relegated to a supporting role, leaving fans perplexed. Why had this winged redhead taken Aquaman's place? Why was John Stewart chosen over the original Green Lantern, Hal Jordan?

One of those questions was easier for the creative team to answer. "Even back when we were developing that first *Superman* concept, John Stewart was the Green Lantern Bruce wanted to use, so it wasn't like CN was telling us, 'hey, you have to have more diversity!' Hal Jordan has a sort of test pilot personality that could be fun but might come off too much as another Batman/Superman type. We realized John, as a former marine, was an inherently more interesting option."

Hawkgirl, while backing up Wonder Woman in the Girl Power department, was also an appealing choice because viewers would have fewer preconceived notions about her, allowing the producers the freedom to implement a daring idea. "The suggestion of having one character be a traitor to the team came from [former DC President] Paul Levitz," Riba remembers. "Obviously, it couldn't be the Trinity—Batman, Superman and Wonder Woman—and it wasn't going to be Green Lantern or Flash, so that left either Martian Manhunter or Hawkgirl. In the end, we knew it just suited her personality better and then we thought, 'hey, we can have a Thanagarian invasion happen!' so we set that up for later."

The backstory of Hawkgirl secretly being a double agent for her home planet of Thanagar was so completely under wraps that less than a dozen people even knew about it. Official tie-in materials like comics and coloring books were left to

improvise their own explanations for why she was in the League. "We kept the secret so tight that none of the guest writers who worked on the show even knew. It was just our core group," he recalls, noting "it was much easier to keep a secret back then, when nobody was really posting stuff online."

Though the Internet was in its infancy, fans were still making their opinions heard. By the end of the first season, the creative team knew viewers loved the voice cast and the appropriately epic storylines but felt there were aesthetic issues to iron out. Unlike its predecessors, *JL* was the crew's first show to be entirely assembled digitally. This made it possible to create bigger set pieces with more characters, but there could also sometimes be color-calibration issues, among other things. "There was a shot of the Flash that we really needed to fix, because the animation we had wasn't doing what we needed it to," Riba acknowledges with a sigh. "Then we remembered we had a perfect shot of the Flash from an episode of *Superman*, so we thought, 'let's pop this old one in and see if anyone notices!' They definitely noticed!" he laughs, recalling online reactions to the sudden appearance of cel animation in the otherwise digital series.

Far more noticeable was the shift in Superman's appearance and confidence. Redesigned with small lines under his eyes and more pronounced cheekbones in hopes of making him look "more like a mature leader commanding a group," the Man of Steel instead appeared weathered and worn out on *JL* and was frequently the first hero taken out in battle. "That was one of those legitimate critiques of the show, I think," Riba concedes. "We had already depowered Superman to some degree on his own series because he can't move the earth and have limitless, infinite power. There has to be some kind of struggle or it's just not interesting to watch ... but still, even that version was too powerful to have on *Justice League*. He would dominate the show and make the group concept irrelevant. So, the question became, 'how do we limit Superman to give everyone else the chance to contribute?' It was a struggle that we figured out better later

on, but initially it was a thing that people picked up on."

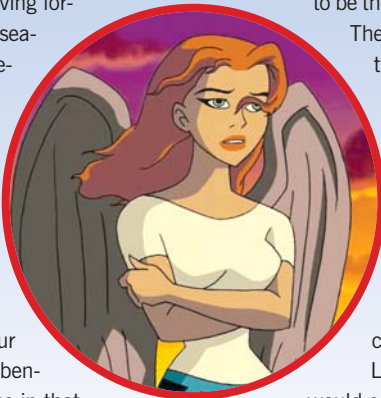
In an interesting way, the idea of a weaker Superman played into the character's overarching storyline. Fans had seen Superman brainwashed by cosmic villain Darkseid and forced to attack Earth at the end of *S:TAS*. Though the producers of *JL* wanted to avoid relying on plot points from their previous shows, it became clear continuity could work to their benefit as they made adjustments going into season two. "[Story Editor] Dwayne McDuffie came in and kind of figured out that one of the reasons why Superman might have been a bit of a wuss in the first season was that he was holding back because he didn't want to lose control again. That was his one big fear," Riba notes. Producers made a point of doing away with both his hesitant nature and wrinkles moving forward. "People later asked, 'oh, did he get a facelift between seasons?' and the truth was that original design just wasn't something all the animators could handle."

When *JL*'s second season premiered in July 2003, it seemed the entire series had undergone a facelift, and viewers responded with universal praise. Action scenes were more dynamic, dialogue was crisper, and character relationships deepened. Additionally, *JL* was finally being broadcast in widescreen, as the showrunners had always intended, and integrating CG elements into the visual storytelling. "We got an artist to design digital vehicles that really enhanced our show," Riba explains. "I think our WWII episodes would have benefited greatly from having CG models of the Blackhawk planes in that dogfight," he notes, flashing back to the first season finale. "I love the Blackhawks and wish I could have done more with them. I researched their island and made sure we did it accurately based on the blueprints from the old comics. Even the song played during their big entrance was loosely based on one that they used to sing going into battle in the comics." Uncertain of who exactly owned the rights to the song, the crew asked composer Lolita Ritmanis to approximate the tune's energy when scoring the episode. "She and our other composers did a marvelous job across the entire series, but I think her Blackhawks theme is really extraordinary. I got very emotional when I first heard it."

Several other moments also stand out for Riba. "To see Gorilla City was amazing. I've always loved Gorilla Grodd as a villain, so that was awesome. Revisiting the Jack Kirby world and having the Justice League go to New Genesis and fight Darkseid was great. And as one of the biggest Ray Harryhausen fans, doing a tribute to his work by having Wonder Woman battle that skeleton army was just a treat. I don't think we would have been able to do that on any other network. I'm also a huge fan

of the Justice Society, so getting to create stand-ins for them in the form of the Justice Guild was really cool. I appreciate that DC allowed that show to go through," he shares, before recalling another instance when the crew had to make adjustments. "I used to read the *Metamorpho* comic as a kid, so getting to do an episode about him was a dream. "I used to read the *Metamorpho* comic as a kid, so getting to do an episode about him was a dream. We were supposed to feature the villain Chemo and have the element man fighting this monster made of chemicals, but they said, 'no, you can't use Chemo because he's in the *Metal Men* and we're developing that,' so we just created a generic monster instead."

To viewers, perhaps the single most successful element of the show proved to be the unexpected chemistry between Green Lantern and Hawkgirl.



Their flirtations flourished into a forbidden love affair that raised the stakes of her betrayal in "Starcrossed," the bittersweet blockbuster finale that closed out the series with a bang. "The show was cancelled and that was our swan song," Riba says of *JL*'s demise. "It was just an extremely expensive production, so getting to do it at all was such a luxury that we went into it with realistic expectations." Looking back, he can't help but feel the timing worked out for the best. "[In the mid-90s], we really weren't ready yet and it would have killed us. Logistically, we needed technology to advance so that we could do *Justice League* justice, so to speak."

Little did the crew realize that the international success of *JL* would see Cartoon Network quickly reunite them for a sequel series, *Justice League Unlimited*, which would quadruple the size of the supporting cast and prove once and for all that Timm, Tucker, Riba and Company absolutely understood how to make the whole superhero team-up concept shine.

One might then ask, given the 14 years of interconnected DC continuity Riba helped bring to the small screen, what advice he might impart to those struggling to do the same on the big screen. "Lighten up, not just the humor but also in terms of who these core characters are. Insisting on always making them the coolest, most badass characters ... it's like, sometimes less is more," he chuckles. "I'm not slapping anybody's wrists, mind you, because it's very hard to make this stuff interesting," Riba clarifies, "but people could stand to remember that it all came from a product made for kids. If your approach is, 'screw what this was, let's just make this for 40-year-olds,' then you're kind of losing sight of where you really were originally. I do want stuff to be more mature, but I think you can do that and still keep the heart and the emotion and the wonder of something that was created for a child."

