

LARGER THAN LIFE

DIRECTOR DAN RIBA
REFLECTS ON THE
LEGACY OF *SUPERMAN:
THE ANIMATED SERIES*.

BY JAMES GARTLER



A SELF-PORTRAIT OF DIRECTOR DAN RIBA.
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THE MAN OF STEEL FIRST FLEW into the hearts of comic book readers back in 1938, but for Dan Riba the love affair officially began in the '70s. "Seeing the Fleischer *Superman* cartoons at the age of fourteen made me passionately love Superman," the animation director explains, remembering his initial exposure to the 1941 Academy Award-nominated shorts. "I was at the World Science Fiction Convention and somebody was screening 16mm prints. They were legendary but they weren't running on TV when I was a kid, so I'd never heard of them. They really blew my mind. It took a while for me to finally see them all on Super 8 and VHS, but I think they're the reason I'm doing what I do."

It's with a similar kind of fondness that fans of *Superman: The Animated Series* now look back on the show, which celebrates its 25th anniversary this year. A product of Bruce Timm, Riba and many of the same artists behind 1992's phenomenally successful *Batman: The Animated Series*, *STAS* has unfortunately spent the better part of its existence living in the shadow of the bat. *BTAS*' sleek 'dark deco' stylings and psychologically complex storytelling made it a game changer. Yet, the same attention to detail and respect for the source material permeated each of *STAS*'

54 episodes, which featured an equally stellar voice cast, original orchestral scores and some innovative contributions to the mythology.

At the outset of the project, however, the crew was more excited about the idea of revisiting Superman's past than charting a course for his future. "I remember initially we were going, 'yes, we can do the Fleischer stuff! That's what we're going to do!' but then, as we got closer to actually realizing the show, we moved away from doing a period piece. We felt like it would be so cool to make it in the exact same universe as *Batman*," Riba recalls, "but both DC and Kids WB wanted something current for kids to relate to. In a way, it was a good thing not to follow the Fleischers because ultimately—how could you? How could you ever make it look that good? It would have been really difficult and we would have suffered in comparison."

Instead, the team focused their efforts on putting new spins on old ideas, beginning with Superman's doomed homeland, Krypton. Typically destroyed in the opening moments of any Superman origin story, Krypton's tragic end became the focus of the entire first episode of the series, "Last Son of Krypton," which Riba directed. "We wanted people to be sorry it was gone," he explains. "As much as I love the late Richard Donner's *Superman* film—and I really, really do—there is a coldness to those Kryptonians. They're distant and sterile and don't seem nice

somehow. You never really get a chance to warm up to anybody. Even the scientists aren't very sympathetic to Jor-El in the movie and are practically saying to him, 'oh, let it burn!' So, I think by making Brainiac sort of the catalyst for the demise of the world, we took the curse off the Kryptonian hierarchy a little bit."

The classic Superman villain first appeared in print in 1958, as a green-skinned alien with a fondness for shrinking cities and placing them in glass bottles. For *STAS*, writer Alan Burnett reimagined Brainiac (Corey Burton) as Krypton's all-knowing Artificial Intelligence—a computer system hell-bent on saving itself by undermining the population's faith in Jor-El's predictions. "I think that new approach to the origin story helped a lot," Riba notes, "though the idea of Brainiac being a Kryptonian computer was so different we weren't even sure if we'd be allowed to use it. Thankfully, DC said 'go ahead!' so that's what we did. And his Kryptonian orb," he adds, "was our take on the Bottle City of Kandor from the comics, only it was more of a program of all the knowledge of Krypton, instead of being a bunch of shrunken-down Kryptonians that Superman would keep in the Fortress of Solitude."

After the heartbreaking opener, audiences were treated to high-flying adventures set in a bright, shiny city of tomorrow. "It was a challenge to design our version of Metropolis," Riba recalls. "We kept trying to come up with something that would

rival the wonder of Gotham City but not look the same. Something timeless but still futuristic. What did Bruce Timm call it at one point: 'Ocean Liner Deco'? I think that kind of fit. It's not exactly the Hugh Ferriss kind of deco," he points out, "but it was optimistic and opulent, with multi-level freeways in a city built up to the sky."

Looking down from above, as always, was Superman's brilliant arch-enemy Lex Luthor (Clancy Brown), depicted as a menacing businessman with a profound hatred of Superman (Tim Daly). "I remember an interview I gave about that idea when the show was starting, and none of it was actually capitalized upon. Lex is a guy that doesn't trust him or like him but the thing is, if there really was a Superman on earth, half the population would be scared of him too and wouldn't want anything to do with him because he's an alien. His power is just so great that no matter how many people he saves, I don't think everyone would trust him. I always thought it would be neat to explore that, but they were like, 'no—it's a kid's show. We're not going to introduce something that heavy. Everybody loves Superman and everyone should, so let's not go there.' But we did eventually go there," Riba notes. "We just had to give it a better reason."

That reason would come in the form of the omnipotent Darkseid, a fearsome character created by comic book legend Jack Kirby. "When the edict came that we couldn't go the Fleischer route, we realized that we could fold in the New Gods and Kirby stuff in a way that we couldn't have done had we stuck with a '30s/'40s kind of feel. So that was our consolation prize, basically, and we savored it."

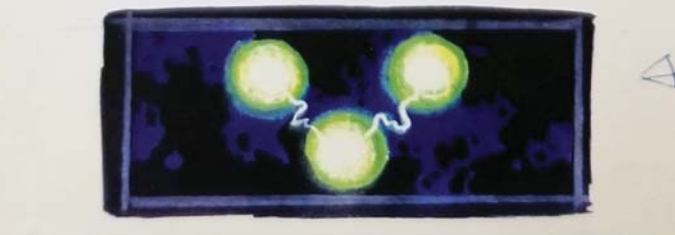
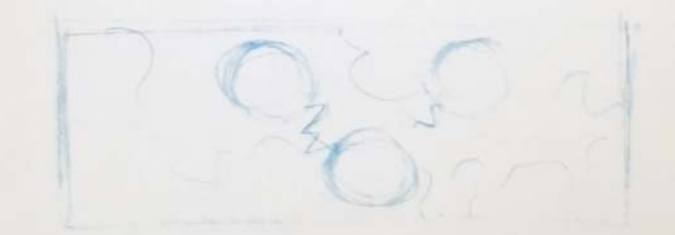
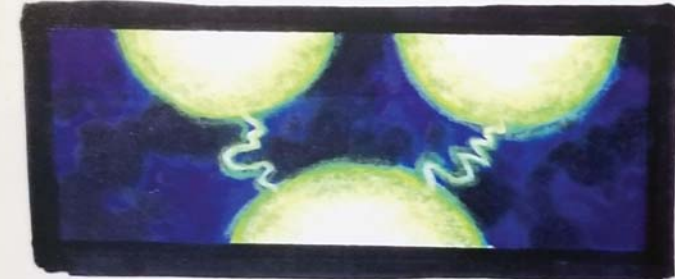
Kirby's wild concepts and powerful imagery had long been a source of inspiration to the creative team, who were eager to bring as much of their hero's work to the screen as possible. "When he died, it became like a mission for us to propel his legacy and make sure he got credit for his creations and that people remembered him. The reality is, in the grand scheme of things, as much as I love comics, even the lowest-rated TV show has many more people watching than the number of people who will buy comics, so the notion of introducing Kirby's ideas in another medium was a way of keeping him alive and getting people interested in his work."

After slowly sprinkling elements of Kirby's Fourth World saga throughout *STAS*, the team brought Superman face-to-face with Darkseid (Michael Ironside) in the epic two-parter "Apokolips...Now!", which Riba directed. "I was trying to lift as much of the actual Kirby artwork as possible from the comics and use it in the storyboards. You can especially see it in the scenes where we were retelling the origins of the conflict between Darkseid and Highfather."

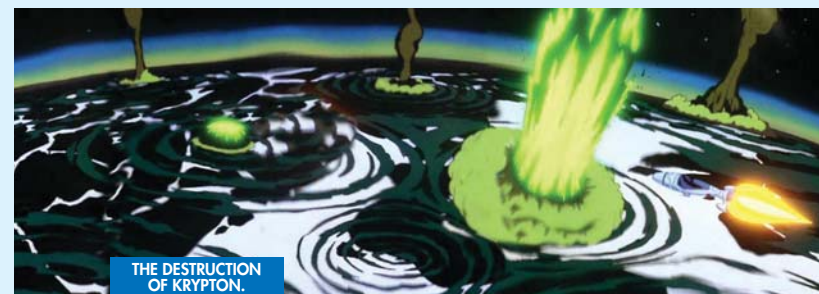
The crew also saw fit to model a significant supporting character after the late artist. "We all went to Kirby's funeral and that inspired us to design Dan Turpin after Jack. In the comics, Turpin's a big bald guy with a bowler hat, but we just felt like



BRUCE TIMM'S DEVELOPMENT OF BRAINIAC'S DESIGN.



CLASSIC PROMOTIONAL SHOT OF SUPERMAN AND LOIS LANE.



THE DESTRUCTION OF KRYPTON.

Jack's real personality fit the character so much better, so we decided to make Dan into Jack as a way of honoring him." The upstart Inspector Turpin (Joseph Bologna) made several memorable appearances before shockingly being executed by Darkseid at the end of "Apokolips...Now!" As Riba recalls, "I don't even think we planned on killing him off from the very beginning, but when that was decided, we basically gave him Jack's funeral. It's not the same headstone design, but it had the same lighting and feel when we were there." The creative team also drew themselves standing amongst the mourners and concluded the show with a dedication that read: "Long Live The King."

While that vindictive act all but cemented Darkseid as the show's Big Bad, other classic *Superman* foes were also given their chance to shine. Fifth dimensional imp Mr. Mxyzptlk (Gilbert Gottfried) brought a madcap energy to Superman's world, at least until he could be tricked into saying or spelling his name backwards twice. "The script for his first appearance was just brilliant," Riba laughs. "Superman is so smart that he's able to do it right off the bat. The idea of him managing to do it instantly, time and time again and Mxy going 'oh, NUTS!' was so funny. Gilbert just knocked it out of the park."

The Toyman (Bud Cort), typically depicted as a dumpy middle-aged collector, was redesigned to resemble a vintage ventriloquist's dummy brought to life and given an

equally disturbing girlfriend to play with. "I really had a lot of fun with the episode 'Obsession', which often gets overlooked," Riba sighs. "It was a cool idea that he'd build a life-size Barbie doll basically, Darci, who ends up hating him and walking away from him. Darwyn Cooke storyboarded the opening of that show and as a toy fanatic, he made sure that the cowboy, astronaut and knight at the start were the classic toys Johnny West, a GI Joe astronaut and the Silver Knight figure by Marx, which was a toy that I had as a kid. It was like our childhoods all up there on the screen."

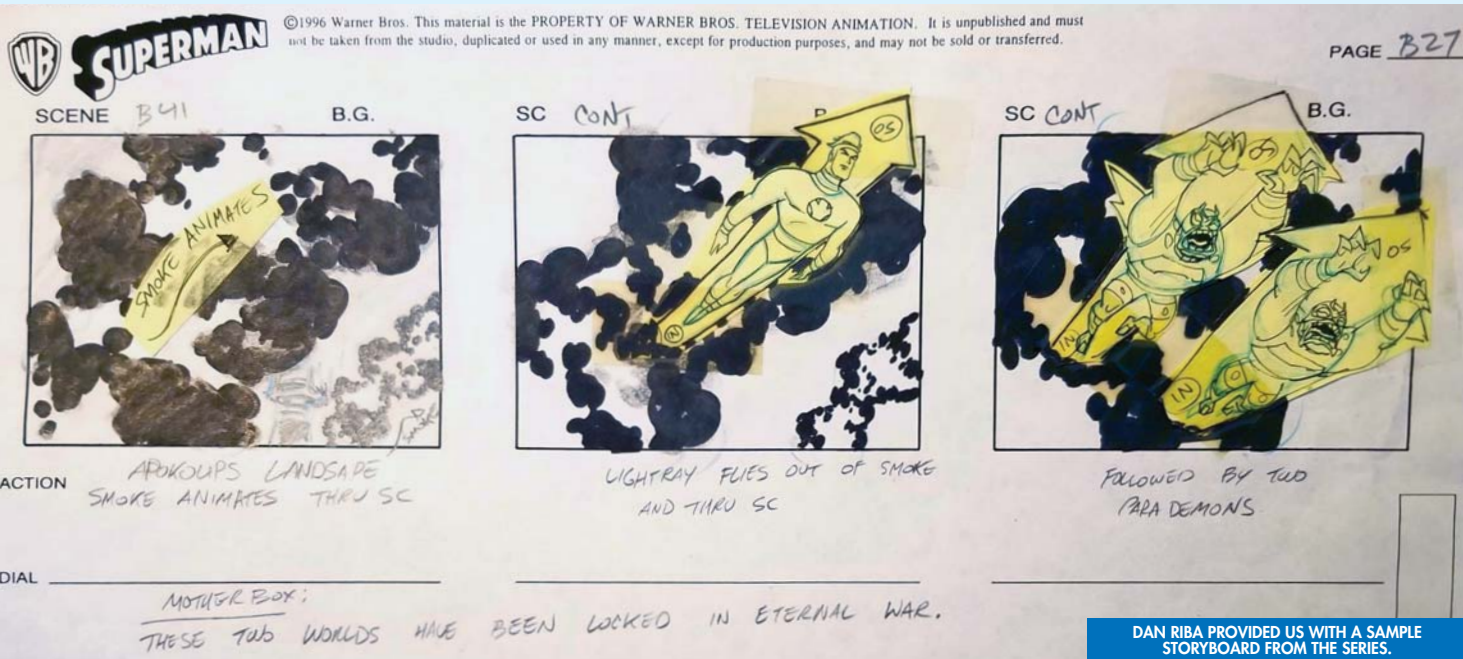
The series also introduced some new adversaries, like the electricity-imbued Livewire (Lori Petty) and lethal bodyguard Mercy Graves (Lisa Edelstein), both of whom would later be integrated into the mainstream DC Comics. Livewire's zany personality and Mercy's devotion to Lex made the ladies seem to some viewers like variations on *BTAS'* breakout femme fatale, Harley Quinn. "She wasn't quite as crazy as Harley", Riba states of Livewire, "and I don't think Mercy was at all in love with Lex the way Harley was with Joker. She was somewhat loyal to him but capable of stabbing him in the back if she needed to."

Harley and Joker would end up facing off against Mercy and Lex in the three-part story "World's Finest," which marked a turning point for *STAS*. "Eventually, FOX stopped running the *BTAS* reruns and the rights reverted back to Warner Bros.," Riba says of the transition. "We originally were scheduled to have 65 half hours of *Superman* and they cut us short by a considerable amount so we could do more *Batman*." Fans rejoiced at the sight of a newly redesigned Dark Knight coming to Metropolis and teaming up with Superman, unaware that it meant the latter's series was essentially being cancelled just as production on the fourth season was underway.

The collateral damage proved to be one of the most popular elements of the *Superman* story—his romance with intrepid reporter Lois (Dana Delaney). "We never had the 'Gee, is Clark really Superman?' and 'How can I get Superman to marry me?' nonsense from the '50s. We sidestepped all of that Jealous Lois stuff, because there are just so many of those tropes," Riba points out. "Instead, we wanted to build a real relationship between them before it became a romance. Honestly, we were planning on doing more with it, but then the show got cut short, so it was in the last episode that they kissed for the first time."

"Legacy", directed by Riba, brought the series-long tension between Darkseid and Superman to a shocking crescendo. Armed with the knowledge that it would serve as their de facto series finale, the team juiced up the script and swung for the fences, allowing Darkseid to brainwash Superman and turn him loose on planet Earth with devastating results. The pulse-pounding two-parter even brought Lois into the line of fire, with her mounting a rescue to save Superman and Supergirl (Nicholle Tom) from execution at the hands of Lex and the U.S. Military. The events of "Legacy" left Superman in the unenviable position of having to exist in a world that could no longer trust him, finally bringing to fruition the concept that Riba had long hoped to explore, albeit at the last possible moment. "I liked it a lot, even though it technically was the end of the series, because I felt like we could revisit the idea of Superman having to rebuild trust later on. Yeah, I know it's dark," he concedes, "with the idea being that now he's got to struggle, but you know, it's Superman—things shouldn't always be that easy for him. And that shot of Superman and Lois together on top of the *Daily Planet* was just such a powerful note to end on."

In retrospect, it seems clear that *STAS* never really got the credit it deserved in the '90s. "It didn't make as big a splash as *Batman* did," Riba agrees, "and it always felt like it was cut short before its time. Being on a new network, it didn't have as much exposure. The tie-in toy line didn't sell for long. Then we did more *Batman*. I mean, it was nominated for an Emmy, but it didn't win until it was paired with *Batman* again." And yet, simply by existing, *STAS* proved the creative team's earlier success with the Dark Knight was anything but a fluke. The series helped to broaden the scope of what would come to be called the DC Animated Universe, paving the way for subsequent shows like *Batman Beyond* and *Justice League* in the years to follow. Most importantly, however, it showed that Superman's adventures could be just as compelling as those of his pointy-eared buddy. If today's generation hails it as the best interpretation of the character, it's simply because *Superman: The Animated Series* earned its reputation not so much in a single bound, but rather—in the immortal words of Lois Lane—one person at a time.



DAN RIBA PROVIDED US WITH A SAMPLE STORYBOARD FROM THE SERIES.