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TV Sunday

Monster that ate \$85 mil

That's the cost of bringing 'Dinotopia' to TV (the story that could 'never be filmed')

By MICHAEL GILTZ

GET ready for "Dinotopia," the three-part ABC "mega-series" debuting next Sunday that's (pre)historic any way you look at it.

"Dinotopia" is just the latest facet of a franchise that began with best-selling books by James Gurney, and now includes spin-off novels, video games, CD-ROMs and theme park rides. It's also turning out to be the most elaborate and expensive — a reported \$85 million — TV pilot in history.

In the miniseries, two half brothers crash land on an uncharted island. It turns out to be a sort of benign "Jurassic Park" where people and dinosaurs live and work together in harmony.

The two brothers learn to fit in and then help rescue "Dinotopia" when the sun-stones that give the civilization its power threaten to fade out for good. Virtually every scene contains shots of dinosaurs of every imaginable shape and size — making "Dinotopia" one of the most eye-poppingly ambitious events ever seen on TV.

"At \$85 million, it's obviously not television money," says Robert Halmi Sr., the executive producer of "Dinotopia" and scion of Hallmark Entertainment, which has previously produced fantastical miniseries like "Gulliver's Travels" with Ted Danson and "The Odyssey."

Halmi says it took two years to film, called for 40 units shooting at one time, features special effects from Jim Henson Productions and the company behind the smash hit documentary "Walking with Dinosaurs," and will be shown in Australia and perhaps Japan as a two-hour feature.

"That's why we call it a mega-series and not a mini-series," says the 78-year-old Halmi.



'I was trying to draw pictures that could never be made into film'
— Dinotopia author James Gurney

Though Halmi is a voracious reader (his office in midtown is lined with books — not to mention Emmys), he took one look at the artwork of author James Gurney and knew he wanted to make a miniseries out of it.

"The two original paintings are what turned me on to it," Halmi says. One of them, "Dinosaur Parade," features humans riding on a stegosaurus and other creatures.

Gurney, who got his start drawing backdrops for animator Ralph Bakshi and later drew illustrations for National Geographic, deliberately let his imagination run wild.

"I was trying to draw pictures that could never be made into film," admits the 43-year-old, who lives in upstate Dutchess County with his wife and two sons.



"Dinotopia" star Tyrone Leitson and co-star. Inset: A James Gurney drawing.

Indeed, Columbia Pictures owned the rights to "Dinotopia" for years, but balked when estimates of a feature film rose to \$140 million.

Now, thanks to advances in digital special effects, "Dinotopia" is slated to join ABC's fall schedule as a regular series. The network, hungry for spectacle as well as family programming, took one look at the scenes of humans and dinosaurs mingling with ease and ordered up 13 episodes.

But clearly it was the visual dazzle that wowed them: the series will contain almost all new actors in the lead roles. And don't look for director Marco Brambilla ("Demolition Man") to be involved either.

Brambilla hadn't done much before this ambitious project.

"I had to have somebody who knew the technical aspect of it more than the moviemaking aspect of it. He knew all about the mechanical part," Halmi said.

Halmi is used to such elaborate productions. But since most of his films are based on classic tales like "Moby Dick" and "Alice in Wonderland," he's a lot less familiar with dealing a still-living author.

"I'd rather he was dead," Halmi jokes. "It's a pain in the ass. It's a lot easier to deal with dead authors. Much easier. They don't fight for their imagery and all that."

In the end, Halmi allows that working

the not-dead author wasn't all that bad. "James was all right," the producer says.

Not surprisingly, Gurney seems eager to see "Dinotopia" become a franchise property. He's already written and illustrated three hardcover tales, as well as overseen chapter books for younger readers and elaborate novels penned by sci-fi mainstay Alan Dean Foster (an author Gurney drew cover art for early in his career).

A video game for Gameboy Advance just came out (home-tested by his 15-year-old son), and his other-world will serve as the basis for a theme park ride at Disneyland Paris.

He's clearly used to letting others run wild with his creation.

"There are a lot of differences between the books and the miniseries," Gurney says. "At first I was nervous about that because we've all seen books made into films where those changes are upsetting."

"No one's going to accuse Hallmark's version of slavishly following the book. Some scenes just completely blow me away and inspire me. And some scenes I look at and wince and go, 'Oh, I would have done that differently.'"

"But I'm not in the business of second-guessing how to produce 'Dinotopia' as a film. It's enough of a challenge for me to figure out how to write a story and illustrate it."