

Avoiding Extinction: Walking with Dinosaurs: The Live Experience, at the i wireless Center

Written by

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The irony might be a little obvious, but extinct dinosaurs have helped stave off extinction for another animal: the creator of animatronic creatures.

Animatronics is "one of those arts that's probably dying out," said Sonny Tilders, the creature designer and builder for *Walking with Dinosaurs: The Live Experience*, coming to the i wireless center March 5 through 9.

Tilders, the founder of Melbourne, Australia's Creature Technology Company, has worked on such films as *Star Wars Episode III: Revenge of the Sith* and *The Chronicles of Narnia: The Lion, the Witch, & the Wardrobe*.

His field, he said in a phone interview last month, has become "less demanding and less challenging and less frequent, to be honest, in the film world."

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But he doesn't sound despondent that computer-generated imagery (CGI) has largely displaced animatronics in movies. CGI has taken over many of the wide shots in film and TV, and it makes it easy to erase elements such as wires. "You're kind of helped out in a way," Tilders said.

Animatronics, he admitted, is "probably not the most practical way to solve a lot of problems. And in the end that's all it is: It's just a tool to solve problems. Fortunately for us, there's no alternative for live theatre; it's the only way to do it."

Based on the 1999 BBC television series, *Walking with Dinosaurs: The Live Experience* opened in Australia in 2007 and features 15 life-sized dinosaurs, some as large as 36 feet tall and 56 feet long. The 96-minute show, in which a paleontologist guides the audience through 200 million years, is geared to family audiences and features no violence.



Live-theatre animatronics have always been more difficult than those for film, Tilders said. "The deal with film and TV is you've got a frame, and it blocks out all the stuff you don't want to see," he said. "For a live stage show, you've got none of that assistance. You can't afford to have 20 puppeteers trailing behind holding cables, or a huge hydraulic compressor linked via enormous lines running behind the dinosaur. We had to make these things autonomous, and self-propelling, and self-contained."

That challenge was exacerbated by the arena nature of *Walking with Dinosaurs*. Unlike the stage versions of *The Hobbit*

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and

The Lion, the Witch, & the Wardrobe

for which he provided puppetry,

Walking with Dinosaurs

has the equivalent of a thrust stage, with the audience on three sides. "They're very much exposed," Tilders said of the dinosaurs. "We can't really mask much. We can't hide behind anything. ... We're out there. People can see us from all angles."

The dinosaurs "move" through the arena on T-shaped platforms, Tilders said. "Using the camouflage to blend them into the floor, pretty soon after they enter people ignore this thing underneath and start, at least for a few seconds, believing that these things may actually exist," he said. "The audience will go with you. ... They'll suspend disbelief and they'll invest their imagination into the puppet and ignore the performer or the operator - if you do the puppetry well enough."

Of course, dinosaurs *did* exist, but the goal is to make audience believe that they still do.

"We did our best to be as truthful as we could to the latest scientific, paleontological evidence," Tilders said. "We build our dinosaurs from the ground up, from the bone structure through to the speculation on the muscle structure, and then you get further into less-known things like skin details and certainly color. There's only just the tip of evidence suggesting some of the colors or bandings that appeared on some of those dinosaurs. ... But even then, we put a rationale behind the color choices. If it's a herbivore, it may need camouflage. If it's an animal that relies on display for protection - intimidation - you might put really striking colors on it.

"It's based on scientific fact; it's not pure fantasy."

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<http://www.dinosaurlive.com> <http://www.museumofscienceandnature.com>