

Behind The Scenes of Strange Hill High



LTW met up with producer Phil Chalk of Factory Transmedia who reveals all about the latest kids TV show from CBBC and FremantleMediaEnterprises (FME) where, at this school, nothing is quite as it seems...



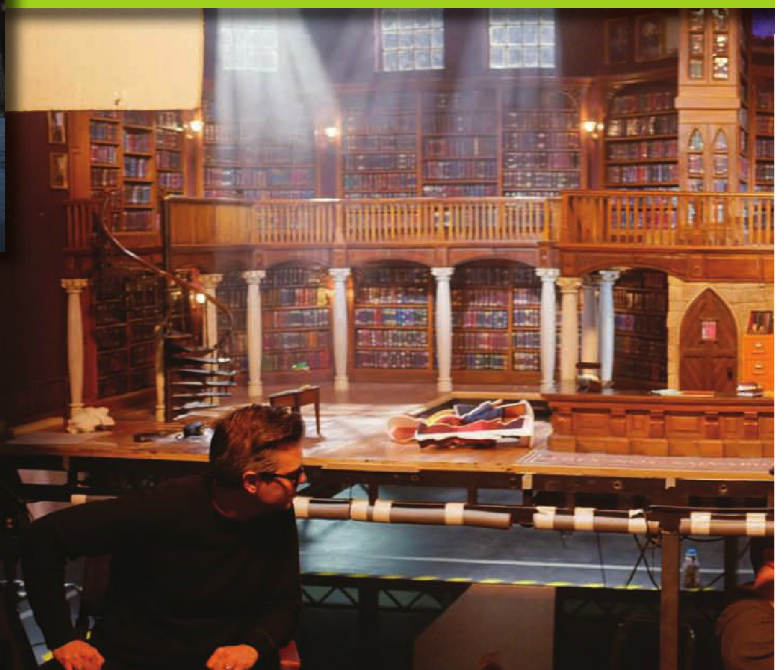
What do you get when you mix The Muppets, The Simpsons and Team America with a good dose of British humour? A fabulous new kids TV show that looks set to be one of the hottest properties of 2013!

Set in an all-but-forgotten inner-city school with many secrets and mysteries, the show follows three intrepid 12-year old students from Class 7X who take it upon themselves to investigate all manner of bizarre and odd occurrences that seem to only happen at Strange Hill High... always with absurd and outrageous results. Strange Hill High is an extraordinary school where mysterious and unexplained goings on are the norm, and it's up to Mitchell, Becky and Templeton

to get to the bottom of it all, with hilarious consequences.

The stand-alone episodes mix puppetry with Japanese style vinyl toys in a live action, stop frame production that utilises CGI to create the unique feel of the show. "I can really imagine it appealing to the target audience and becoming cult," Factory Transmedia's Phil Chalk revealed to LTW as he showed us around the set.

The idea was developed by Kat Van Henderson, and it caught the eye of Sarah Muller, head of CBBC acquisitions and drama development. Kat, a former music video producer who had worked with the likes of Cher, is currently working with David Alpert the Exec Producer of the Walking Dead to produce a US version of her adult show - Yo! Funky Town. She was



playing around with spoof videos when she came up with the idea for the new type of animation that combined rod puppets with digital facial animation and played around with it to see just what could work in practice. Dubbed Hypervynorama, her company Yoshimi and Kato, together with Factory Transmedia have developed the real-time animation that is shot like a blockbuster and it is being used to full effect on the new Strange Hill High, which she describes as: "Grange Hill meets The Muppets in South Park".

And it could well have that mass appeal. Running the show and heading the writing team is Josh Weinstein, a former executive producer and writer of The Simpsons and Futurama. He is joined by another American scriptwriter and a team of British writers, including Emma Kennedy (who is also the voice of Becky, and current Celebrity Masterchef finalist), who are who are adding that Brit touch.

"We have a stellar team of writers, headed by Josh," says series producer Phil, "so lots of the Simpson/Futurama sensibilities have been brought to bare on this. We hope that it will appeal to two levels of viewers – the kids and adults – without losing sight of the core audience which is 6-10 year olds."

The fabulous characters have been brought to life as rod puppets made by world-reknonwed puppet

makers Mackinnon & Saunders, who made the puppets for Tim Burton's Corpse's Bride. They used their considerable experience to bring the characters to life. Fifty puppets make up the principle cast and the puppeteers operating them come from a wide range of performance backgrounds including one from the eminent War Horse production. And the team behind it are hoping for big things.

How an episode comes together

By the time Strange Hill High is aired on CBBC it will have taken 20 months in production, and that is without the year or so spent in pre-production! From the writing of the scripts and casting of the voice artists, the actors then came in and recorded the episodes in three sessions from October last year. It was a collaborative effort with almost everyone being available to come in together and bounce off each other while bring the characters dialogue to life.

Physical master maquettes and artwork were made to further develop the look of the main characters. Every shot was then storyboarded so that it could be married to the dialogue cut. The two dimensional animated storyboard was then put together for the directors to use in the studio.

Two live units with six puppeteers and two cameras produced up to two minutes of footage a day. In

post production CGI added natural movement and animation of the eyes and mouth as well as the highly detailed, rich and layered backgrounds.

Original music was provided by composer and musician Paul Lovatt-Cooper, musical director with Factory Transmedia.

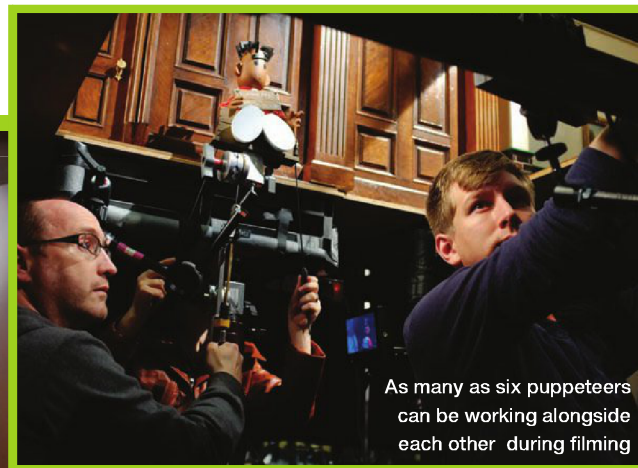
Doing something so new and different hasn't been without its difficulties though. "Trying to predict and schedule a show of this nature can be a challenge," Phil confessed. "Each episode is like a mini movie. When we have had action filled

episodes, that has been a bit of a problem. We think 'ok I can imagine how that can be done in 2D animation, it would be a pain but we could do it'. And then you think about it in CGI and think 'ok that would also be a real pain' and then we when we think 'OK we're going to shoot it live, with rod puppets with eight people under the set trying to manipulate each of those movements and yet still make a convincing piece' – well it's feast, famine and flood really!"

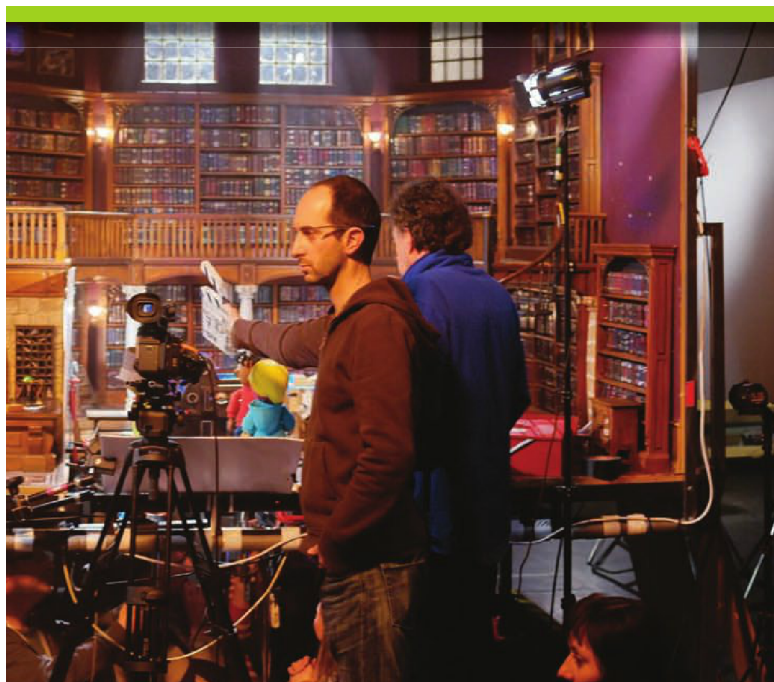
Thankfully they have pulled it off and the resulting series is spectacular!



First Assistant Director Nick Gorman shows Valerie Taylor the footage against the storyboard



As many as six puppeteers can be working alongside each other during filming



The miniature sets are highly detailed and are built by 16 prop and set builders

Meet the Characters

- **Becky Butters**, voiced by **Emma Kennedy**, is an over-confident under-achiever
- **Mitchell Tanner**, voiced by **Doc Brown**, the new kid in school who is super cool and the main hero
- **Templeton**, voiced by **Richard Ayoade**, geeky science kid who comes up with the quick one liners
- **Mr Abercrombie**, voiced by **Jonathan Keeble**, is a John Cleese-esque headmaster who gets more and more irate as the days go on.
- **Other actors** lending their voices to the plethora of characters, including **Miss Grimshaw** the school secretary and **Mrs Grackle** the music teacher, are **John Thomson, Caroline Aherne, Marc Silk** and **Melissa Sinden**

Licensing opportunities

As Strange Hill High looks set to become a hit, distribution deals for overseas markets and home entertainment are being dealt with by FME after they introduced the show at Licensing International Expo in Las Vegas last year. With its distinctive characters, brilliant scripting and comic edge this is one programme that looks set to provide strong collectability and a cult following. The potential across multiple licensing categories includes toys, gaming, mobile, apparel, sponsorship, online, live events and more. It appeals to different age groups with different levels of humour making it a programme families can watch together and appreciate together.

"The brand bibles are being assembled now," Phil says. "We think it will be phenomenal for the back to school merchandise but it will also be cool so there will be a cultish element to it as well." With such a wide range of merchandising and licensing potential, time will tell what will be the big sellers for Strange Hill High.

FremantleMedia Enterprises is on stand E050 at BLE



Becky

Mitchell

Templeton

Strange Hill High Fast Facts

- Takes almost two years from pre-production to showing
- episodes are 22 minutes long
- there are 30 sets –which is movie-like proportions
- 50 characters
- 8 prop people
- 8 set builders
- 5 full-time camera operators
- 2 studio directors
- 6 puppeteers
- 1 full-time costumier