

COVER STORY

Special effects make a lost continent worth a visit to 'Dinotopia'

Dinosaurs once roamed the earth, as did epic, money-on-the-screen miniseries designed to wow viewers during ratings "sweeps" months.

These two life forms are revived in ABC's six-hour *Dinotopia*, humbly billed as "one of the most lavish and technically complex productions in the history of American television."

True enough, but can it hope to draw a bigger crowd than ABC's nickel-and-dime *Laverne & Shirley* reunion? *Dinotopia* merits gold stars for its first-rate special effects and grand-scale ambitions. Its bang-for-the-buck may be muted, though. The financially pressed broadcast networks are loathe to take risks like this anymore, particularly when clip shows and cheapskate "reality" gambits (*The Bachelor*, *Celebrity Boxing*) can pay bigger dividends for comparative pennies.

Dinotopia in fact may be the last big hurrah for septuagenarian showman Robert Halmi Sr. and chip off the old block, Robert Halmi Jr. On the plus side, their big-ticket productions have included *Merlin*, *Gulliver's Travels*, *The Odyssey* and *Arabian Nights*. But lately they've floundered with the likes of *The Magical Legend of the Leprechauns* and *The 10th Kingdom*, both of which bombed at enormous costs to NBC.

Dinotopia, presented under ABC's *Wonderful World of Disney* banner, is generally aimed at the kidosaurus set. The littler you are, the less you'll mind the mostly standard-issue acting from a no-name cast that obviously cost

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Dinotopia

B 6 p.m. Sunday, 7 p.m. Monday and Tuesday, ABC (Channel 8). Starring Wentworth Miller, Tyron Leitso, Katie Carr, David Thewlis, Jim Carter, Alice Krige, Colin Salmon and Hannah Yelland. Produced by Robert Halmi Sr., Robert Halmi Jr. 6 hrs.

much less than the imposing wizardry from FrameStore and Jim Henson's Creature Shop.

The Halmis always like to let the public know the particulars of their productions' expenditures. So the condensed version goes like this: *Dinotopia*, based on the James Gurney books, was 17 months in the making, deployed 170 carpenters and used 140 tons of casting plaster and 1,200 gallons of paint to create its showcase Waterfall City, which occupied 5 1/2 acres on a Pinewood Studios backlot and was buttressed by 85 miles worth of metal scaffolding. Whew. Exhale.

The story begins with teenage half-brothers Karl and David Scott (Tyron Leitso, Wentworth Miller) taking an ill-fated plane ride with their vagabond dad. Nasty weather sends them plunging into the



The special effects and the dinosaurs are the real stars of *Dinotopia*.

Caribbean Sea. The boys swim ashore while Dad goes down for the count. Lo and behold, they find themselves in Dinotopia, an enchanted lost continent where blissed-out humans and various prehistoric creatures co-exist peacefully as equals.

Some of the creatures even talk, namely Zippo the long-necked *Stenonychosaurus* (voiced by Lee Evans). Fear not, he's not nearly as aggravating as Jar Jar Binks. Matter of fact, he out-acts the entire human cast and also learns to play ping-pong.

The land of Dinotopia is protected by gleaming sunstones, which are mysteriously fading. That's not good, because the sinister "World Beneath" is yearning to take over.

Meanwhile, Karl and David keep bickering with each other while vying for the affections of nubile Marion (Katie Carr), daughter of Waterfall City's Mayor Waldo (Jim Carter) and a revered matriarch named Rosemary (Alice Krige).

The Captain Hook of the proceedings is a festering pirate named Cyrus Crabb (David Thewlis). He yearns to escape

Dinotopia and enlists Karl as an ally in his suitably nefarious scheme. David, who likes *Dinotopia* lots better, goes off to be a cadet in a Skybox Corps commanded by taut-faced Oonu (Colin Salmon), whose first name isn't Yoko. Graduates get to fly mammoth Pterosaurs — or die trying.

Dinotopia's storyline is reasonably engaging if not engrossing. Think of it as a series of efficient conveyor belts to the next special effects sequence. And some of this stuff is pretty spectacular, particularly Monday night's journey through flight training school.

Younger viewers might be frightened by some of the jeopardy sequences, although none of the violence is grisly or prolonged. The young actors playing David and Karl are woefully mechanical in early scenes, but get marginally better as the story unfolds. Nonetheless, Zippo steals nearly every scene he's in, even if it's often petty theft.

All in all, *Dinotopia* is a commendable effort to jazz up network television in times of abundant, redundant Muzak. In this case, you might be blown away.