

ON TELEVISION • GAIL PENNINGTON**Digital puppet stars in PBS series**

Kermit the Frog would be green with envy. A kid named Sid, making his debut Labor Day on PBS, doesn't have to ride on a puppeteer's hand when he performs.

As the newest star from the Jim Henson Co., Sid is a lifelike cartoon kid who inhabits a three-dimensional world made possible by head-spinning advances in digital puppetry. He'll appear in 40 episodes of the new PBS Kids preschool series "Sid the Science Kid," produced with a system the Henson company — now run by Henson's kids Brian and Lisa — calls revolutionary and proprietary.

"This is actually a process that's not being done by anybody else," Lisa Henson told TV critics during a visit to the "Sid" soundstage last month. "We've done some early, small shoots with it, but doing

gpennington@post-dispatch.com
40 half hours with the digital puppetry and live animation system has really proven to be an exciting breakthrough for our company," which is devoting all its resources to the process.

"Sid" is shot in a motion-capture space ringed by sensors. Two members of Henson's performance unit — Misty Rosas, who does the body, and Drew Massey, who speaks for Sid and animates his face, including synchronizing his lips — bring Sid to life.

Rosas is a body-movement specialist whose work corresponds to motion capture used for a decade in movies. But Massey is a puppeteer who, via a computer program, controls Sid with his hands, just as he would with a puppet hoisted over his head. The combination of techniques is one thing that

PLEASE SEE **SCIENCE | E2**
stltoday.com/tubetalk

sets the new process apart, Henson said.

Watching themselves on monitors as they perform, Rosas and Massey communicate with the director and with one another seamlessly.

"They've been working together on this character for more than six months," Henson said. "So when a director is directing the animated characters, he can give a direction to Sid. Drew and Misty will both perform in concert because they're psychic now."

Without storyboards and with a live director, the process actually resembles a sitcom more than traditional animation, Henson said.

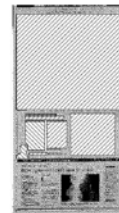
"All the performers perform the blocking and the characters' physical animation right here on the soundstage," she said. "We actually direct the animation as if it's live action, using a director who calls out shots and takes just like a live-action director."

Also as with live action, "Our camera moves live," Henson said. With three cameras, plus a handheld, and live switching, "when we have a director in here, he can set up the shots and move the cameras around. (And) we can actually do take 1, take 2, take 3 until the joke and the timing of the scene is exactly right."

Preschoolers who watch "Sid the Science Kid" won't see the technology at work. Instead, PBS and producing station KCET in Los Angeles hope, they will engage with both the characters and the concept as energetic and inquisitive Sid asks such questions as, "Why do bananas get mushy?" then sets out to get the answers with the help of family, friends and his teacher.

"Science is out front and center," said Joyce Campbell, KCET's vice president for children's programming. "We're not sugarcoating it. We don't have to because science is so exciting. Every day Sid says, 'You're a scientist. Try this, too.' Science learning is something that you want to start doing from a very

early age, and you really can."



Creatures are featured on Chaplin's old studio lot

On a lot built by Charlie Chaplin in 1918, the Jim Henson Co. is surrounded by history.

Chaplin left his footprints in concrete in a corner of the courtyard; company co-president Brian Henson's office, once Chaplin's, is full of photos, trophies and memorabilia. And over it all, a giant Kermit the Frog hangs, waving.

But aim a camera at Kermit, and you'll be interrupted.

"Don't shoot him," a Henson employee warns. "He's not ours."

Kermit and all of the Muppets are now owned by Disney. But TV critics who visited the lot in downtown Hollywood last month found plenty of furry friends in the Creature Shop, which occupies a space called the Barn, once used by Chaplin to build scenery for his movies.

Lining the walls are boxes labeled "Feathers for Whiskers," "Long and Short Bunny Fur" and, ominously, "Frog Parts."

"Please don't touch the puppets," a sign reads, and for good reason. Reaching out to stroke Baby Sinclair from "Dinosaurs," or Mr. Tinkles from "Cats & Dogs" was almost irresistible.

Grant Baciocco, our tour guide and a performer with Henson's "Puppet Up!" troupe, explained how, once upon a time, even controlling a creature's eyes took five people.

With what's known as a Waldo mitt inside the body of a puppet, the puppeteer's hand can control many functions at once. With new digital puppetry, as used in PBS' "Sid the Science Kid," the character is controlled by a puppeteer, but now he uses a computer.

Finally, volunteers got a chance to pick up a goofy green critter and try their hands at puppetry, interacting with a monkey manipulated by Baciocco. And for a few minutes, even TV critics were kids again.

BY GAIL PENNINGTON



