

The Justice League

Based on legendary DC Comics, the Cartoon Network will launch the new animated series "The Justice League."

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By John Scott Lewinski

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What would you need to construct a major animated television series based on popular, globally known characters?

You might want the strength of Superman, the speed of The Flash, the ancient wisdom of Wonder Woman and the fierce determination of Batman. Alternatively, you might just seek out the skills and experience of top animation producers Bruce Timm and Rich Fogel.

This spring, the writer/producers donned their capes and cowls as the creative force behind the Cartoon Network's new animated adventure series, The Justice League.

Based on legendary DC Comics superheroes made famous by the hugely popular Super Friends series of the 1970s, The Justice League will feature the feats of Superman, Batman, Wonder Woman, The Flash, Green Lantern, Hawkgirl and the Martian Manhunter as they team up to battle monstrous evil throughout the universe. (Aquaman will also make an occasional appearance.)

Internet rumors had the series originally in development years ago before the breakout success of Warner Bros. Batman Beyond animated show. As more resources went into the production of eagerly awaited Batman Beyond episodes, The Justice League fell to Krypton's back burner.

When Cartoon Network decided to proceed with 26 episodes in early 2001, they wrapped up a deal with Warner Bros. to produce the show. Suddenly, rumors became reality, and Fogel and Timm topped Cartoon Network's list of "super" creators. Maybe the pair didn't have to battle Lex Luthor and The Joker, but there was a lot of work to do to hit a November, 2001 premiere.

Cartoon Network execs knew that the benchmark for quality was set exceptionally high by the immensely popular and successful Warner Bros. shows, Batman: The Animated Series, The Batman/Superman Adventures and Batman Beyond. Batman: TAS had a an outstanding run of more than 100 episodes while both Superman and Batman Beyond racked up a respectable 50+.

"We know from our experience of airing Super Friends for years on Cartoon Network that Justice League will have a vast, built-in audience," Betty Cohen, Cartoon Network Worldwide president, said. "With Justice League, we're positioning Cartoon Network to attract an even broader audience of teens and adults who are seeking smart, exciting, action-packed animation at its very best."

"I can think of no one more appropriate or qualified to bring The JLA superheroes to life than Bruce Timm and Rich Fogel," said Jean MacCurdy, president of Warner Bros. Animation. "They are passionate about creating an entertaining and dynamic series that will thrill the legions of JLA fans everywhere, as well as introduce a whole new generation of fans to these classic characters."

According to Fogel, the show's elements came together quickly for a show that languished in the Hall of Justice rumor mill.

"The Justice League was something that Bruce and I were reluctant to get involved with because of the huge scale of the show," Fogel said. "But, once Cartoon Network committed to the show, we were excited to get going."

So, faster than a speeding cursor, Timm and Fogel set to work on a story bible for Cartoon Network.

"They wanted to see a starting-off point," Fogel said. "It wasn't a pitch because the commitment was already made by Cartoon Network. But, the bible served to show the various departments at Cartoon Network what kind of show we were doing."

From that point, production moved on to a 90-minute pilot episode. Timm explained that the scope of the story and its team of seven lead characters make the more traditional 30-minute format less workable.

"We'll do the 90 minute story to introduce the characters," Timm said. "The following episodes will be 60 minutes, though we may do another 90 minute story at the end of the season."

"A 30-minute show is just not enough time to give each of the characters something meaningful or interesting to do,"

Timm added. "Also, we're developing some significant enemies for this team to fight. We're throwing planets around and such in this show, and that scope of material needs more than 30-minutes."

Fogel agreed, adding that the show's 90 or 60-minute length made the TV adventures feel more like animated features than mere cartoon episodes.

"I can't completely explain it," Fogel said, "but with animation you can cram a lot more content into 60 minutes than you can with live action. The end result is a show that feels like more than an hour's worth of material."

For narrative inspiration, Fogel and Timm turn to a combination of classic DC Comics content and their own imaginations. "There's a mix of both the classic and the cutting edge," Fogel said. "I like to go back to the early stories in the classic comics and adapt and update what originally drove those heroes back then to today's market."

"The main concern is to develop opposition that's worthy of the entire team," Timm added. "That might mean teaming villains or offering a single villain possessing enough of a threat that every team member has a threat to confront."

To modernize the premise further, Fogel and Timm made sure to introduce unique personalities and tension between team members, adding more intriguing chemistry to what was once a very happy super family. For example, Flash's younger, punkier mentality might clash with the more traditional American, apple pie philosophy of Superman.

"In the old comics, the characters were too interchangeable," Fogel said. "They were all pretty much just good guys. That worked then, but it'd be boring now. So, we'll use different personalities, different groupings and different interplay."

Timm agreed, "We use more conflict between team members. In building the team, we pay attention to the dynamics of the characters and make sure their interaction continues to grow."

Though booked for 26 exciting episodes now, both Fogel and Timm hope for Justice League to fly into future seasons.

"Cartoon Network is very good at promoting their series," Timm said. "We think they'll really make this an event show."

Success for The Justice League could mean more than just a beachfront Fortress of Solitude for Fogel or Timm. The show could open the door for future individual adventures for Justice League members.

"Success for The Justice League wouldn't necessarily mean we took the DC franchise as far as it can go," Fogel said. "In a way, it opens more doors. A year ago, it would have been more difficult to sell a Green Lantern, Flash or Wonder Woman series on their own."

Now, if The Justice League "takes off" as Timm and Fogel think it can, the sky could literally be the limit. About This Author John Scott Lewinski writes books, screenplays, short stories, interactive games, sketch comedy and magazine articles out of Los Angeles, CA. Simon & Schuster will publish his short story, "Devils in Gray," in a late 2002 science fiction anthology. A winner of multiple screenwriting contests, Lewinski's latest book, Screenwriter's Guide to Agents & Managers is available from Allworth Press.