

kidscreen®

About reaching children through entertainment

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Chicago's WTTW and Roman Coppola have teamed up to produce curriculum-based *Mission to Planet 429*, about a comic pair of aliens charged with investigating this strange planet called Earth

Coppola helms *Mission to Planet 429*

A pair of intergalactic alien space travelers and their hapless interpretations of life on Earth are the focus of *Mission to Planet 429*. The new mixed-media series for six- to nine-year-olds was created by filmmaker and son of legendary director Francis Coppola, Roman Coppola.

So how did Hollywood royalty end up making a kids series? It turns out Chicago PBS affiliate and prodco WTTW was looking to build a show around the idea of information literacy and ran the request by Coppola. What he's come up with is a curriculum-based concept that aims to strengthen reading comprehension by showing kids how to gather information and providing them with strategies to understand their world.

Inspired by Coppola's childhood love of the classic comedy team Laurel and Hardy, the aliens are sent to Planet 429, or Earth, and charged by their ruler with the mission to investigate specific things and places and report back. Highly intelligent on their home planet, the duo is completely clueless about life on Earth—creating a lot of misunderstandings and misinterpretations that serve to fuel the comedy while also educating the audience.

Coppola has also devised a unique aesthetic for the show—his team plans to shoot footage in different locations

all over the world and superimpose live-action puppetry, filmed against a blue screen, onto those background shots. And Coppola says he'll be keeping an eye out for little details in the live footage that can spawn additional comic bits. For example, pigeons pecking at the ground in a piazza in Italy could wind up pecking the feet of the alien explorers, thanks to the magic of editing.

The production will also make use of several different types of puppets to get various close-up and full-body shots. Coppola further explains that shooting in front of a blue screen will free up the puppeteers to work with a full range of motion, unlike those trapped behind a set wielding hand puppets, for example. The production team is considering adding CGI enhancements to the characters' faces to boost their range of expressions, too.

Karen Gruenberg, the former EVP of content at Sesame Workshop who was brought on as executive producer by WTTW, says the 104 episodes are being produced as 11-minuters that can be adjoined by interstitials to create 52 half hours. Delivery is slated for early 2010 and WTTW is working with a budget of US\$300,000 per ep. WTTW is actively seeking out co-production partners and Gruenberg says the production team

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is building storylines and assets that will work across platforms from the outset. She says the property's a natural fit for interactive gaming, as kids could easily embark on their own virtual missions. A consumer products program built around the aliens and their various gadgets and tools that they use to explore 429 is also a possibility, she notes.