

Now & Next E05 – Behind Sinking Ship's Success: Taking Risks in Kids' TV

Full interview transcript

LK: Leora Kornfeld

JJ: JJ Johnson

LK:

Okay, JJ. You have said, the quote was almost verbatim, "We don't make any shows that we are not terrified of doing." I just wanna know if this elevated level of fear or stress is a good business strategy.

JJ:

I think it's a good business strategy. I'm not sure that it's good for your life, but I think it's important to keep pushing yourself and reminding yourself that you're only as good as your last show, and so part of that is pushing yourself out of your comfort zone, whether it's with the storytelling that you're doing or the technology that you're using. I think it's imperative to be a little bit scared, otherwise I think you might be falling back on an easier path, and I just think, in this day and age, easy is not what tends to do well.

LK:

How did you come to that realization, that being sort of on-edge and filled with ... I don't know if fear is the right way to put it, but filled with that sort of, let's call it, positive stress, how did you come to that conclusion?

JJ:

I think, truthfully, probably, as I've gotten friendly with some of the network heads, or at least started to hear their perspective in terms of when pitches were coming in or whether they were getting kind of delivered the same thing from certain companies, it just started to fill in that other side of the equation, which is those people that you need to come on side with your idea, and then give them enough ammunition to sell it upwards, that it's not just their decision. More and more, these are becoming coalitions or bigger groups that need to decide whether a show's moving forward, and so part of being able to do that, I think, is to give them something tangible to sell to their teams, and a lot of that comes from being the first to do something, or pushing stories that no one else would do, or trying a new technique that people haven't done before.

I think just not playing it safe, which, I think, for a time, is what they were seeing a lot of, or, for Canada specifically, I think, a push to creating things that were universal, and by getting ever more universal, started to lose their edge or had no edge at all, but they are appealing to everyone or aiming for the lowest common denominator. It became a little bit more like pablum or filler and not cutting-edge programming.

LK:

Yeah, I often hear people say, "Oh, what are so and so looking for?" whether it's Netflix, or Nick Junior, or whoever, and there's, like you say, that desire to figure out what it is they want, and then to deliver that, as opposed to a differentiation strategy.

JJ:

We never think about what people are looking for. We think about what we wanna say, and that has always been the driving force. Once we know that, once we know what we're willing to talk about, knowing that the process is painful and that we're willing to live with that idea for five years, then it's really about finding the partner that agrees with that message. Spinning your wheels in terms of thinking what someone wants, I think, is a recipe for disaster.

LK:

Speaking of that ability to really stick to the vision that you have, I wanna talk about your show *Annedroids*.

That could not have been easy for you to dig your heels in with the US networks who, I think, across the board, said to you, "We like the show, but it can't have a little girl in the lead. It's got to have a little boy."

JJ:

Yeah, absolutely. I mean, that was definitely a challenging time. When I get nos, and we get nos more often than we get yesses, oftentimes, I try to look for the silver lining in those, and most often, for us, at least, a no is because that thing has not been tried before, and so I know inherently that, as long as we can push it through somewhere else, it's going to be something different, because everyone else said that they wouldn't do, so it's just trying to find that path to get it made, because you know that everyone else has probably accepted that no and not pushed forward. I would say Sinking Ship, if nothing else, is a little bit petulant, and doesn't like to be told that it can't do something, and so we tend to

fight harder.

Because this was an issue that I couldn't see why it would be an issue until we started to get nos and until networks were unusually honest that it was because it was a girl lead, we realized that problem was because there wasn't examples of a girl as a lead in a science-based show. Because there wasn't examples of success with that, that's where they were able to continue this fallacy that it doesn't work, and so it became a battle cry for us to prove them wrong.

LK:

You had the first mover pain.

JJ:

Yes, for sure.

LK:

It's funny, what you described. You know how they say tragedy plus time equals comedy, so I guess your equation is something like network no plus time plus Sinking Ship equals yes?

JJ:

Yeah, for sure. We talk about this, honestly, internally. We were lucky, at that time, that we were in production on another show, and so we didn't need that show to go right away. Honestly, at that point, I think we had 60 or 70 people on staff, that had been with us from the very beginning. I worry that, if we needed those resources then, would we have caved? It's something that I genuinely think about. It's always also become part of our strategy to make sure that we have enough going on that we will never become responsive to just one line of thinking or one set of notes.

LK:

Where did that hunch come from, that kids themselves wanted to see things other than what they were already getting on other screens?

JJ:

Good question. I think, for me, kids start off as kind of perfect people. When you work with kids, and I was lucky at the start of my career to work with a lot of really young kids, they are kind of these idealized, perfect little people that have a really strong sense of morality, of what's right and what's wrong, and over time, they learn to be divisive, and to not like things, or judge people, and

so I think we've always tried to find that alley that still speaks to kids as these bright little beings that hopefully have shown an alternate view of the world, where it's not necessarily just about famous or acquisition of wealth, that there are other ways to live your life, that can be a little bit of a counter-message to everything else that's out there.

I would say, at its core, the production team, here, and the creative team, here, did not live the lives of what a lot of the shows out there, for kids, depict, and so it's very easy for us to want to fight for something that speaks more to our younger selves than what's currently available. Sorry, does that make sense?

LK:

Yeah. Does part of it have to do with the fact that you finance either a lot or all of your own pilots, so you can run your own market research and tweak things that way?

JJ:

Yeah, I mean, I think you never want to be beholden to one person. I mean, we try our best to not go into development deals with networks, because I think, also, it's just a basic psychology game. Once they know that they have you and you can't go somewhere else, then I think it's easy to fall down their pile, whereas, if you're kind of showing everyone, all at the same time, it breeds a little bit more of a sense of competition or that there's a chance that you'll end up somewhere else.

At the end of the day, I think, execs, their core job is to get that next big show or tap into that next great talent, and so to be under their thumb, or for them to feel that they've already got you, I think, takes away some of the fun and some of your maneuverability to jump ship if you find that, creatively, you're not on the same wavelength.

LK:

When you do the pilots in-house, as you do, do you bring in a little focus group of kids to give you feedback?

JJ:

No, I have a hate-hate relationship with research, in that I've had so much research, including that boys won't watch a girl lead, thrown in my face, that I don't put a lot of stock in it. I think that people can generate the research that they wanna generate. I think you need to stick with your gut. If you feel that

this is the right message or that this message deserves to be out there, then you need to push that through. What's interesting with *Annedroids* is that they've since done research that little girls and boys ... They did a study in Germany, Canada, and the UK, and they showed two episodes to boys and girls that hadn't watched the show, and before they watched the show, they asked them what they wanted to be, and afterwards.

Before, girls were singers, and actors, and what you would kind of typically think. After the show, and this is just after two episodes, I think it was 30 or 40% said they wanted to be engineers or create robots. They had asked the boys what they thought girls could grow up to become, and it fell down similar lines. After they watched the show, they saw this empowered girl, who was fearless in her knowledge, and suddenly that changed their view. It's such an easy reminder. I think it's all obvious to us that kids need to see it to be it. They need to see iconic characters that they can relate to or that represent themselves, and it's our job to give it to them. As producers, it's our job to see where there is absence of those messages and fit them in.

LK:

I was reading that Mattel is doing this thing with Barbie, because, I mean, when I was a little kid, Barbie, as a role model, first of all, she had the impossible physique. Nobody's built like Barbie, but all of the outfits were like, "Here she is as a waitress or a flight attendant," which, in those days, was called stewardess, or, "Here she is as a secretary," but now they're doing this project that teaches kids you can be female and intelligent, and you can succeed as a CEO, or as a scientist, or things like that. It's very much in the zeitgeist right now, isn't it?

JJ:

Yeah, I mean, I think we have so much further to go. I'm thrilled that gender diversity is something that's hitting everyone's mind. Obviously, ethnic diversity needs to be on that heel. For us, it's also economic diversity. Just showing wealth on screen, or people that don't worry about money, or don't have that challenge, I think, is unfair. I guess the next step for us, too, is neurological diversity, showing kids that actually have traumas and hurts, and trying to get some empathy that not everyone has it easy growing up. It is a step in the right direction, but there's a lot of room and potential to reach audiences that I think are still wildly under-served.

LK:

Now, there is an [article](#) about Canadian companies producing kids programming, that appeared not that long ago in The Globe and Mail. I'm eager to hear your thoughts on it. The headline was something like 'Why Canada's Reputation as a Kids TV Production Powerhouse is Under Threat', and the article talked about how there have been these changes in CRTC regulations that give broadcasters more flexibility in the way that they spend their money on Canadian shows, so rather than having to be mandated to spend money in a specific genre, they could spread that money out across different genres.

The argument put forth in the article was that Canada's reputation, as a result of that, as a producer of top tier kids programming, is somehow being affected, and not in a good way. Of course, there's a lot of other factors in there, not just funding guidelines but the way that kids are consuming media is very different. They have a zillion entertainment options, games, YouTubes, apps, mobile, all that kind of stuff. I'm curious to hear your thoughts on the claims made in that article and what you're seeing out there.

JJ:

Sure, I mean, I guess, as a baseline, I don't think that any producer can complain when there are this many billion-dollar companies getting into the streaming service, whether it's Apple, or Facebook, or YouTube, or Netflix, or Amazon, all of them spending huge amounts of money. I think Canada, or at least how we've always looked at Canada, should always be a wonderful home base and a place where you can take some risks and get a piece of the pie, but it should never be the whole pie. We're not competing just in Canada. We're competing globally, and we should finance globally.

If that means that you need to change your strategies, in terms of what you're producing, to attract a global audience, and if that means that you need to maybe make some riskier content, then that should be the direction that we go, but there's more money in the system than there's ever been. I think, for me, where we're proud, as a company, is that we have a lot of networks coming to us, who are interested in our producing power, nothing to do with whether we have access to tax credits or whether we can make CMF-able. They wanna come to us because we're particularly adept at live action, CG-blended shows.

I think that's where everyone needs to position themselves. These companies are so large and have so much money that we cannot rely on the financial advantage that we may have once had, that now we need to be competitive with

our content, and that means that we need to start taking some more risk.

LK:

At the same time, I saw a video of a talk that you did. I think you were talking about *This is Daniel Cook*, so that was one of the earlier shows you did, and I think you said you did-

That was the first.

The budget was really quite modest. Wasn't it 13 episodes for, what, five-, six-hundred thousand?

JJ:

Yeah, and I think we had to defer half of that just because we weren't financed for the full amount. No, I mean, that was our first show. I remember the day after we wrapped. I was directing it and producing it with Blair and Matt, who are our business partners here, and the next day I had to go back to my waiting job, because there was no money coming in, because we had waived everything. We were lucky that Disney, in the US, picked it up, and once they picked that show up, all these other pilots that we had produced, just to kind of keep active and keep our minds open, suddenly got picked up as well. That American shine is wonderful. You just need to, once you have it, try to use it to its fullest.

LK:

The show, that was your first show, and it made it to Oprah.

JJ:

It made it to Oprah.

LK:

How does that happen?

JJ:

Oh, it was ridiculous. I mean, it was such a crazy experience, in that, A, that show was the simplest thing imaginable. It was following around a kid and seeing a kid as a real kid. Our inexperience was our greatest asset, so we didn't cut out the bad bits where he was kind of a brat sometimes or said something nonsensical, because we thought it was very funny, and so that show came off as very authentic. Yeah, it caught the eye of Oprah. I'll always remember,

'cause, after the first season, we made it our mission that we would only do PR things that appealed to kids, that we weren't just kind of looking at this as an interesting little character, and so we decided that we would always ask Daniel if it was more of an adult opportunity.

We asked him if he wanted to go on Oprah, and he said, "No." Everyone froze. He's like, "I don't sing opera." We're like, "No, it's Oprah. It's a TV show." He was like, "Oh, yeah, that's fine. I'll go on Oprah." I mean, it was a surreal moment to be there, watching him on the stage with her. Just thinking about it now still gives me chills. Yeah, it was incredible, but it was a whirlwind, as the last couple of years have been, truthfully.

LK:

I bet. You were there in the audience?

JJ:

Yeah, watching him co-host with Oprah. They were doing interviews with other interesting kids. He just held his own.

JJ:

I owe him so much. When I met him, it was at a particularly low point in my life, and he was just this innocent little spirit, and was so funny, and he got me out of my funk and got me excited about making content for kids. That has persisted, and I think often about a lot of the original inspirations for what that show would be are still infused in the shows we make now, which is trying to be as honest as we can with this audience, because they deserve it.

LK:

I was gonna ask, where is Daniel Cook now?

JJ:

Yeah, so he's in law school. He has an eye on politics, still wants to be prime minister, and he works here in our accounting team over the summers to make some extra money. He's just a really brilliant ... I wanted to say kid, but guy, who's kept this kind of unique view on the world. I have no doubt that, if he decides he wants to be prime minister, he will be.

“...and he's not the only one here. We have kids from *Odd Squad* that are now going to university, that come here for either internships or part-time. We have some of our kids that wanna be writers and directors. One of our kids, Jadiel, who played Nick on *Annedroids*, has written two scripts for *Dino Dan*. For me, 'cause you spend so much time with them, you can't help but become a little bit familial. It's so nice that they obviously had such a great experience where they wanna stay hanging around, and I can see that future, where they're running this company, having grown up in it.

LK:

And you're Uncle JJ, right?

JJ:

That's it, 100%, but I would love that. They're really interesting little people. Watching them kind of develop, and seeing what was in their characters then and how it's morphed or evolved, is ... I don't know, it's fascinating.

LK:

But it's kind of like that show [28 Up](#), which I'm sure you're familiar with. What did they say? Show me the boy at seven, and I'll show you the man at 28, kind of like that.

JJ:

I mean... They're way more sophisticated than we give them credit for. They have an absolute aesthetic, and they wanna be talked to at their level and not talked down to or just sold things to.

LK:

Not only that, unlike other generations, they know very well how to swipe and hit next, and hit forward, and hit delete. That's a whole different game.

JJ:

Yeah, and that, as producers, we need to up our game and meet them at that level. This is not an industry for the meek. This is not an industry that deserves to be overly protected. We need to stand on our own. We've got an immense

creative talent pool here, but they need to be given direction, and that direction needs to be more challenging and to be more upfront. Canada is such an awesome place, that we need to represent that internationally, those morals and those ideals.

To me, that's what CMF and all of those funds and our network partners here are for, is to try to find a way to craft that message and make it appealing to the rest of the world.

LK:

I was watching ... It could've been a trailer or something on your YouTube channel, and it showed how there's a number of your shows that have been, I don't know if they were, translated or overdubbed into all sorts of languages, German, French, Japanese, just because you have shows that on in over a hundred territories. I'm just wondering, when you're developing shows, the extent to which you're thinking about global markets and what works globally.

JJ:

Yeah, you're right. It's something like, I think, 50-plus languages, and continue to get renewed. To me, the first pickup is important, absolutely, but when they're renewed for another four years, that's when you know that you've created something that has a chance at being evergreen or at least that the message is something that's resonating, because it didn't just hold its own for that little period of time, that it's something that, multiple generations, they think it's going to appeal to.

I think there is definitely a universality to kids, in that they are looking to be excited about their world, and they're looking to see people on screen who feel and look like them. In that level, I think there is definitely certain characteristics, that you can put in any show, that's going to appeal to a lot of kids. I think we're always trying to create shows that don't look or feel like other shows out there, and when you can do that, whether it's a girl scientist on *Annedroids*, or whether it's four kids in the future trying to save the last elephant, or whether it's a little girl who loves dinosaurs, if you can find your own lane, where you don't have to compete with other people, because they're simply not doing it, it tends to make it easier than to get your shows in multiple countries.

LK:

With all of these new screens and platforms, viewing behaviors, and also thinking about global audiences, what do you see as the big challenges for producers right now?

JJ:

I would say to differentiate yourself, I think, trying to take a deeper look at your creative talent pool and see how they're being managed. Are you stepping in the way or are you bringing potentially antiquated ideas to the table, when it needs to be cutting-edge and leaning towards the future? I think that's a hard thing to do, I think, to take a step back and be like, "Have you tweaked up your team to be different?"

If you look around the room and you see people that look and sound like you, I would hasten to guess that what you're creating isn't necessarily the most cutting-edge. It's about opening yourself up to different voices. We are certainly trying to do that with our writers and directors, not going back to the same group of people, constantly asking ourselves how we can change things, and listening to our cast. I mean, we're particularly lucky that the age groups that we are producing for are our kids on set, and so, when you give them a seat at the table too, and actually ask them about these lines, and do they make sense, and do they like the script, and what do they like and don't like, and then take that input and actually put it into your show, it only strengthens the project.

LK:

Thank you very much. This was very, very insightful. JJ Johnson of Sinking Ship Entertainment, thank you.

JJ:

Thank you so much.