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THE BIG INTERVIEW: Josh Selig, Founder, Little Airplane

by **Samantha Loveday** |

Creator of 3rd & Bird and The Wonder Pets tells us what's coming next.

“The entire entertainment business is ultra competitive. If anyone wants to be guaranteed employment, they should quit show business and become a speech pathologist. Currently 97 per cent of them have jobs.”

It's certainly an interesting piece of advice from Josh Selig, boss of Little Airplane, the firm responsible for current pre-school hits The Wonder Pets (on Nickelodeon) and 3rd and Bird (Cbeebies). Luckily for our industry, though, he doesn't appear to be heeding it himself.

Little Airplane is a boutique production company based in London and New York, specializing in pre-school content. As well as The Wonder Pets and 3rd and Bird, it also produces Go, Baby for Playhouse Disney and has been in business for about ten years, with a combined staff of around 100 people including writers, animators, composers and educators (“and even one professional whistler,” Selig adds).

The London office is a pretty recent addition, with Selig saying that it was opened because he wanted to be a tube ride away from the BBC to help support 3rd and Bird.

“In our UK office we do all of our voice casting and recording for 3rd and Bird, as well as the re-voicing of The Wonder Pets for Nick UK,” he explains. “We also have a small creative team in the UK and together we're actively developing new projects for the UK and Canadian markets.”

Selig is currently exploring a possible move to the much talked about Media City in Salford so that the firm can remain close to BBC Children's. “We want to support the BBC's efforts to build a vibrant and creative community up north. There's also a great wealth of creative talent in the Manchester area.”

With The Wonder Pets and 3rd and Bird currently both performing well, Selig and his team have turned their attentions to their next pre-school offering, a short-form series called Tobi. “It's a show about a little boy who wants to make the world a better place to

live in,” Selig tells us. “The series tackles difficult issues such as poverty, extinction and homelessness, but does so in a gentle, poetic and pre-school appropriate way.”

Tobi has already been pre-sold to Treehouse TV in Canada and Nickelodeon in Australia. It may sound quite different from Little Airplane’s previous offerings, but the firm will have already put Tobi through its own form of research testing, called Show & Tell Research, to make sure it is hitting all the right notes with its potential audience.

“This involves turning our scripts into colourful storybook panels and showing them to three, four and five year-old children,” Selig explains. “Our director of research, Dr Laura Brown, then asks the children specific questions designed to determine comprehension and appeal of the episodes. We are then able to spot problem episodes and fix them early in the process.”

This research is carried out both in the US and the UK and the firm is also happy to offer out the service to other companies.

“We are happy to do anything we can do to help other companies who make quality pre-school television. We have already provided consulting and development services to a wide range of companies including Cranium, Cbeebies, Al-Jazeera, Discovery, Sesame Workshop and Granada.”

As well as the TV part of the business, Little Airplane has also recently expanded its reach with the launch of Little Airplane Films and Little Airplane Books. Selig is already in negotiations with a well-known UK company to create a pre-school series that will include a film component, while its first book – A Book for You – will include ten poems for young children and very simple hand drawn illustrations.

“We are confident we can deliver a world class animated feature for under \$5 million keeping everything in house,” Selig says of the new Film division. “And, we have written and designed over 50 books based on The Wonder Pets and a handful for 3rd and Bird, so it simply made sense to us to launch Little Airplane Books and write and illustrate our own titles.”

Does Selig think it’s important to give the business more strings to its bow to avoid putting all its eggs into one basket? “We think the pre-school basket is actually rather large and underserved, at least when it comes to high quality content,” he says. “Our hope is to continue to grow as a pre-school brand that produces the best TV shows, books, films and live events.”

Having said this, the firm does have one project in development for a family audience. “It’s called We Can Make a Better Kids’ TV Show and it’s a reality show about six families who come to our studio and compete to make the next great kids’ show. We’re very excited about this one and have just begun pitching it.”

There certainly seem to be no signs of Selig giving up show business and becoming a speech pathologist any time soon, but what advice does he have for those looking to break into the pre-school sector?

“Companies often don’t realise that by the time they have spotted a trend, it has passed. Companies have a better shot at success by going with their creative instincts than by looking on the rear view mirror. Originality will prevail, especially in a saturated market.

“If they do not have a good creator on board, they should go and find one. Then they should empower him or her to make a beautiful show bible. Then they should pitch that bible to every broadcaster on the planet. Then they should have a great attorney to make great deals for them.”

And anything to avoid? “Don’t follow trends. Set them. All the great shows have broken all the rules. Remind your finance team that they are working in show business.”

And what’s the future for Little Airplane – where does Selig see himself and the firm in five year’s time? “I will be running the company via high speed internet from a hammock on a secluded beach in southern Mexico,” he says. “And Little Airplane will have its own pre-school TV network.”