

Making a show from special experience with children: *Baby Jake*

A CONVERSATION WITH BILLY MACQUEEN*

How did you come up with the idea for *Baby Jake*?

Macqueen: Well, the idea is based on my business partner Maddy's first son Ralph and it happened when he was 1 year old. She came into the office and she said, "You won't believe what happened." Ralph was really grumpy and in a really grumpy mood and she couldn't get him to do anything. Her 6-year-old nephew was staying with them and out of nowhere he said, "Well, Ralph wants a banana." And she said, "Look, he doesn't really eat bananas." She was desperate so she just chopped it up and put it in a bowl. And her nephew Peter said, "No, he doesn't want it in a bowl. He wants it in his hand so he can eat it himself." And Maddy said, "He has never eaten a banana like that. But hey, let us stop him being grumpy. Let us try it." So she peeled a banana and handed it to Ralph. And Ralph chomp, chomp, chomp, ate it straight away. So Maddy was like, "Hold on, I am the Mom. I should know these things." She then said to Peter, "Well, okay, Peter. What does he want to do next?" And Peter

said, "He wants us to read the book with the red boat in it and then he wants to have a bath." And she said, "Okay, let us do it," and it all worked perfectly.

So she came into work the next day and we sit opposite each other and she said, "You won't believe what happened with Ralph." I said, "I think that is fantastic." Then we debate it. Was it because Peter, the 6-year-old, was younger than us adults and could understand Ralph because he was only 4 or 5 years ago the same age or was it more? Was there a total baby language that adults just didn't understand? Then I took it on another step. I said, "Well, when my daughter was one and a half we used to go to the park to feed the animals. She used to have these long conversations with the ducks. They would chat in a way. She was giving them bread. They were quack, quack, blah, blah, blah. And I always thought it was because she was feeding them bread and they had just wanted to eat."

And then I said to Maddy, "Well, maybe this language is not only for babies but other young kids could understand

themselves and animals." And that is how *Baby Jake* began.

What happened next?

Macqueen: What happened next was we then recorded a real baby. We talked about the idea and how we would like to do it and obviously there were 2 things. One, we wanted the voice of a real baby. Two, because on *The Simpsons* and other family-targeted shows it is adults acting as the kids and we had a saying in the company, "Adults faking children's voices just didn't feel right." So right from the outset we felt "Okay, we are going to try and get this as truthful as possible" and we sent a family who just had an 11-month-old baby a recording kit and they recorded their baby for over a 3-month period. We obviously had to edit out the brothers and sisters slamming the doors and Mom and Dad cursing and things like that but we then had a massive vocabulary of this baby. For instance, we had 16 different laughs from this baby and we edited that all together, edited all the other sounds out and we came out with a vocabulary of about 140 sounds and we edited that down to a core 60 and that became *Baby Jake's* language. And it is the same language in all the TV shows.

And the casting? How did you find this baby who became *Baby Jake*?

Macqueen: Well, we thought it would be easier than it was. We actually saw over 300, 400 babies and we went all over the United Kingdom and we were one day away from postponing the studio shoot and we went through the agents, we went through schools, we went through all the normal agency



Screenshot from *Baby Jake*
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Ill. 1: 9-month-old *Baby Jake* experiences adventures with fantastic characters like Pengy Quin the Penguin. *Baby Jake* has a photographic face put on an animated body and the voice of a real baby

ways. In the end, we had a team just winging around photographic agencies and companies that took photos of babies. And luckily, this baby, the baby who became Baby Jake (Ill. 1), had signed up the day before to this photographic agency. We asked them in and they came in and – a huge piece of luck – they didn't have childcare for his brother so his brother came as well who happened to be a 6-year-old (Ill. 2). Well, we saw this baby who was just a delight and we saw the brother and the brother was fantastic, too. We cast them both on the spot. And the real piece of luck was the beautiful cuddling moment when Baby Jake kisses his brother on the nose. We could only get that because they are real brothers – so I would like to say we planned that, but it was actually a huge piece of luck.

Jake and his family live in a windmill. How did you come up with the idea for the windmill?

Macqueen: Well, the time we were making *Baby Jake*, the economy was down and people were pretty depressed right across Europe and other parts of the world. And we wanted it to be kind of quite positive about families. There had been some negativity about families in the UK and about kids and we just thought, "Well, hold on. Kids are great." I mean mainly the negativity was about teenagers and youths, but we just went, "Families are great and a new baby and a family, it is just love and although it cries a lot and can keep you up, babies in families really are wonderful and the interaction with brothers and sisters or next-door neighbours or the uncle or grandpa who lives down the road is just fantastic." And we wanted a big place that they could all be in. So we chose a windmill, a little bit of fantasy, a little bit of fun and a place big enough for lots of kids.

Did broadcasters get interested in the idea?

Macqueen: While we were talking about and trying to get *Baby Jake*

made, some people really didn't believe us that a 6-year-old boy and his baby brother could attract any attention. And then brilliantly on YouTube, *Charlie bit my finger* turned up. The clip shows a boy and his baby brother and the baby brother bites his finger. When I showed this to some TV executives they asked me, "How many people on YouTube have looked at it?" At the time it was 400 million, it is now something like 800 million. The core of that little clip is love and I think in the end that is what we hoped to achieve with *Baby Jake*: within families, there is love and babies can bring really loving moments to a world that sometimes isn't so loving.

How did you develop the idea for the graphics?

Macqueen: We knew we wanted Baby Jake to look real but to be able to do fantastical things. So the show opens and ends with the real-life Baby Jake but we also knew we wanted him to do funny things that only an almost superhuman baby could do. So we took the baby actor of Baby Jake and we shot over 20,000 digital photos in 2 days and we surrounded him with 8 Canon cameras and they all triggered each other and we've got every single position, finger movement, mouth movement, eye movement. That led us to be able to create with fantastic artists in Ireland called Jam Media the magical photo-realistic animated world of *Baby Jake*. They helped us create his imaginary world. And there is a great artist at Jam called Rafa and he just got the show. He is obsessed with taking photos of the natural world and we wanted everything to be from the real world, even if it was an apple, we wanted it to come from photo realism so to be a blown-up shot of a really beautiful red apple. It was a wonderful



Ill. 2: Creativity can mean to implement something we cannot possibly imagine: Baby Jake's brother "translates" the baby babbling for the audience

creative cooperation with Rafa and all the team at Jam Media.

In your opinion: where does your creativity come from?

Macqueen: I think my creativity is based in my love of working with kids. Before I was working in television, I was youth worker and I worked with kids with mental problems and I always got a very direct and honest response about what they liked and what they did not like. It helps your producer instincts grow. And I found that the heart of a good idea is often found from watching kids and talking to them.

I think the second part of my creativity comes from looking for the invisible. I think if everyone is doing shows about blue boats and how children should swim, go and do something else. If commissioners from the broadcasters around the world are looking for cooking shows or live-action go-to-sleep-and-dream-nicely night shows, do something completely different and look for the invisible. Look at what kids are playing with, doing, talking about and believe that you can create something to engage them. You will. ■

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