

It is the leaves that alert you to the seriousness of purpose that lies behind *Waybuloo*, the BBC's latest hit for the under-fives. It turns out that before the shooting of this exceedingly pretty programme began in 2008, a team of seamstresses spent four months sewing artificial leaves on to the branches of real trees, in a vast hangar on a Glasgow industrial estate. You don't do that unless you have the utmost faith in the end result.

Children's TV doesn't get much bigger than *Waybuloo*. It was 'the number one new pre-school property in 2009' according to the NPD market research company. By the middle of this year, individual episodes were reaching more than half a million viewers.

At first glance, *Waybuloo* conforms to many of the characteristics of earlier hits such as *Teletubbies*

(1997-2001) and *In the Night Garden* (2007-9). Like them, *Waybuloo's* four main characters (called Piplings) have silly names and are colour-coded – blue, brown, pink and purple. They have huge smiley heads and tiny bodies. Winsome doesn't begin to describe them. But where their predecessors were costumed actors, the Piplings are computer animations loosely based on animals, with key characteristics. Thus monkey-like Yojojo represents happiness; bear-like Nok Tok stands for cleverness; pink, kitten-like De Li for love; and Lau Lau, the rabbit, represents the imagination (though viewers are more likely to latch on to less abstract traits, such as Yojojo playing musical instruments or De Li gardening).

The Piplings live in the paradise garden of Nara, and every relentlessly positive episode features

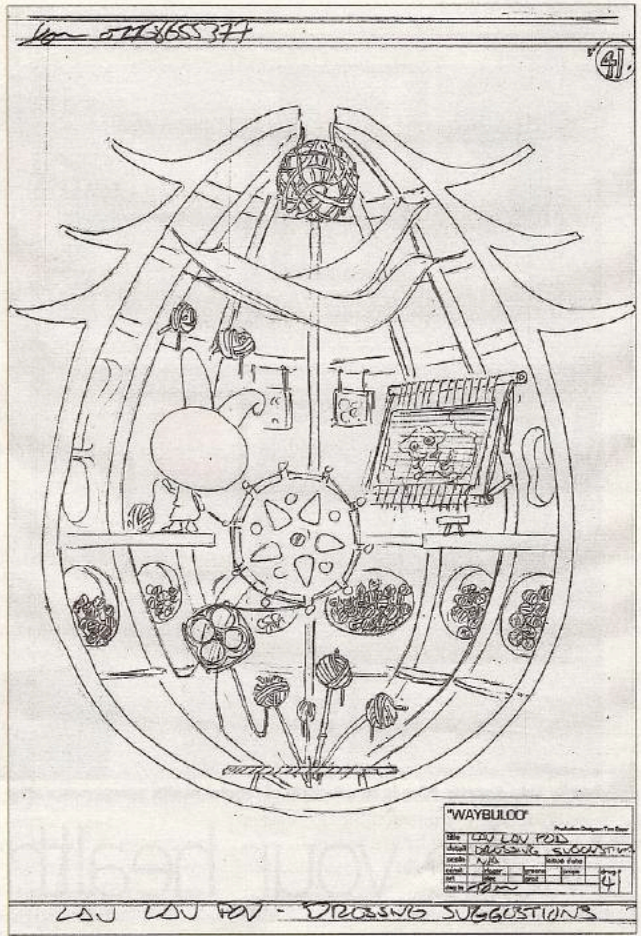
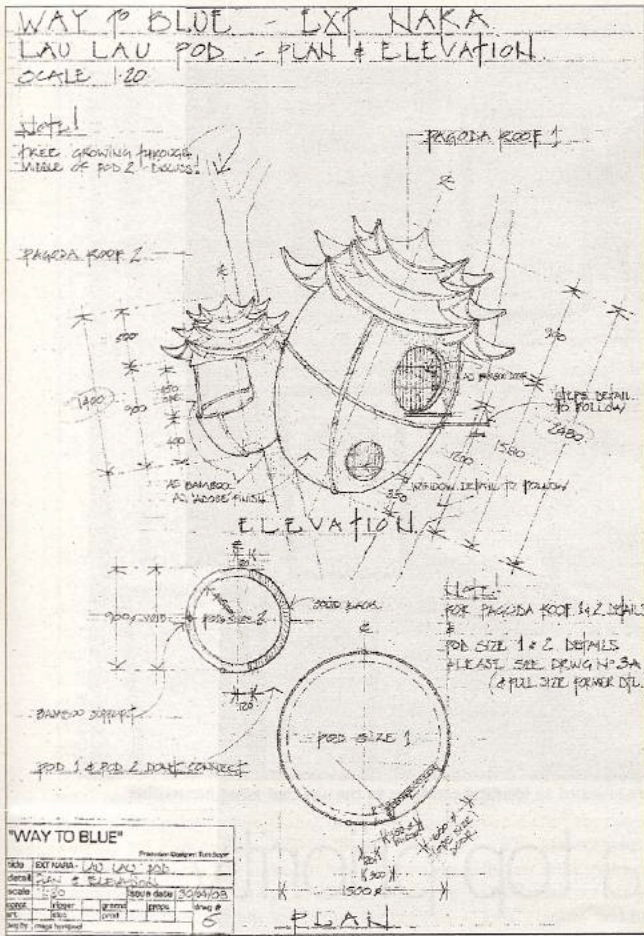
a simple problem to be overcome (titles such as *Counting Seeds*, *Hiccup* and *Frog* give the flavour of their contents) and follows a similar pattern, with a group of lively children (real, not animated) bounding through the scenery to play a game of hide and seek (*Peeka*) with the Piplings, and then to practise a gentle form of yoga (*Yogo*), all set against a soundtrack of windchimes, xylophones and choral chanting. *Yogo* allows the Piplings to achieve a transcendental state of pure happiness, known as *Buloo*, causing them to float into the sky. Taken as a whole, it is a beguiling, charming mix. And its success is no accident.

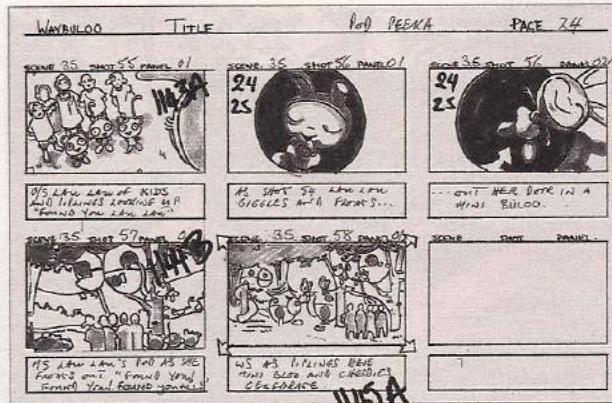
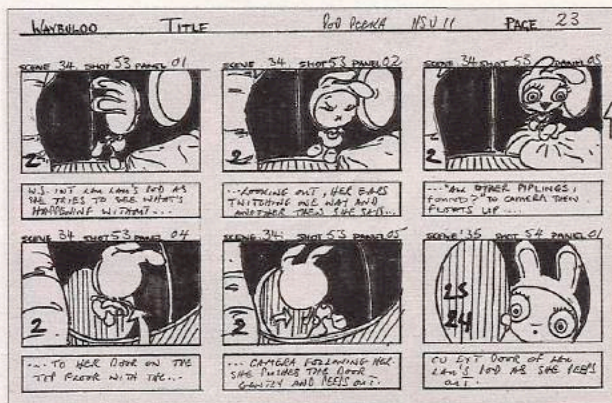
At the outset, CBeebies (the BBC's dedicated under-fives channel) gave concrete expression of its belief in the Piplings' New Age capers by commissioning 100 19-minute episodes. 'That's like doing

Floating sensation

Half a million children turn on and tune in to *Waybuloo*, the BBC's hit show for pre-schoolers. Annabel Freyberg takes a trip to Nara, where yoga points the way to happiness

Above *Waybuloo* is filmed in a vast hangar in Glasgow; here the paradise garden of Nara, where the Piplings live, is created down to the last stitched-on tree leaf. **Above right** sketches for Lau Lau's pod – early on, the programme was called 'Way to Blue'. **Right** *Waybuloo* combines live action with computer animation, which requires a leap of imagination for the real children involved





'An adult audience seems to find Waybuloo totally mystifying. They don't get it'

Storyboards set out a game of Peek-a, hide and seek, for Lau Lau and the children

four series back to back,' Simon Spencer, the series producer, explains. Spencer is *Waybuloo's* gatekeeper: not only does he oversee the live production in Britain and the longer process of animation that follows in Canada (led by Donny Anderson, a Scot, and his company, Gallus), but he also approves all merchandise, granting licences and checking the quality of finished products, from pillowcases to dolls. After a decade in children's television Spencer knows exactly what appeals to small children. He cut his teeth directing at the Jim Henson Company before taking charge of *Five's Thomas and Friends* from 2003 to 2008.

'The advantage of being commissioned for such a large number of shows was a sizeable budget,' he says. 'I don't think it's any secret that the commission was £10 million. That meant we could create a world that would look beautiful – on a very filmic scale. It is a film set really. It's a whole world. To that end we brought in Tom Sayer, a designer who art-directs movies and has an eye for detail and scale and quality.'

The *Waybuloo* set is a thing of delight and wonder – Willy-Wonka bright, a dream of perpetual summer with red acers, blossom, bamboo, bonsai, hostas, poppies, pumpkins and child-size paths, arches, bridges, even a waterfall. The greenery is supplied by Palmbrokers in London (which provides horticultural props for the film industry); the sand is play sand. 'Everything is safe and friendly for the kids, and to their scale,' Spencer says.

I tiptoe into Nara during a break in filming; in a little orchard a picnic rug has been laid out with packs of cards and other entertainments to amuse the children until shooting resumes. I feel like a giant interloper. Isn't it difficult for the children, I ask Spencer, to pretend to be playing and conversing with animated characters that don't exist?

The children are all five years old, he explains, which is a deliberate choice of age. 'At five kids have still got that imagination, that spark, because they're acting to nothing, there's nothing there for them to see... At five they can do that; at six they're just a little bit more cynical.'

It took a year to produce the final design for the garden, which has a Japanese feel, especially

in the Piplings' egg-shaped bamboo playhouses. 'The aim was for a just-over-the-hill place that any child could find,' Spencer says. 'One of the design considerations was not to have it necessarily very English or European, but to mix the cultures, the colours, the textures, and create a world that children everywhere might find when they're out exploring.'

'We wanted the set to be naturalistic yet magical, so it's all correctly planted,' Sayer says. 'I used to go into woods and wander around, so that we could copy the natural forms.'

The set occupies one end of a monumental former industrial space that was once used to construct turbines for power stations. Having been a BBC Nations and Regions commission, *Waybuloo* had to be filmed in Wales or Scotland, and it proved hard to find a tall-enough location to create the sense of an outside space. 'We needed a huge open hangar with no columns to get in the way,' Sayer says. 'It was a long and involved process.' The search led him and Spencer to Glasgow; although the city has no film studios, it had a 58,000sq ft space – enough for a forest of stitched trees, plus an on-site edit suite.

Crucially, the set is designed to allow filming all over it, rather than from only certain angles, as is usually the case. The footage for one episode is shot daily. The set is not a sound stage, and the children's Scottish accents are replaced later with a mixture of regional accents voiced by 10- and 11-year-olds.

Andy Drummond, *Waybuloo's* art director, informs me that, size-wise, the set is on a par with the James Bond stage at Pinewood, the largest in Europe. 'We also have the world's biggest 360-degree blue screen wrapped around the set,' he says excitedly. 'It's 131ft wide by 146ft long by 126ft high and was custom-made in London.' This allows a background to be imposed on the live-action shots, 'a panorama of hills, so the world stretches on for ever'.

While proud of the behind-the-scenes wizardry, Spencer says it is crucial that the blend of live action and technology looks real. 'I think we've created an amazing-looking show,' he says, 'but the

look alone is not enough. I know the complexities of compositing and lighting and live action, but for the audience it needs to be seamless. You just have to tell the story well and draw the child in or all that technological stuff counts for nothing.'

While combining live action and animation is hardly unknown, it is, even in this computer age, an arduous business – for the first 100 episodes, a seven-month shoot in Glasgow was followed by 18 months of animation work in Canada, with a team of 50 live-action crew members matched by a team of 50 animators. '*Waybuloo's* computer generation is of a quality that until a few years ago was only seen in a big-budget film like *Toy Story*, not in a TV series,' Spencer says.

It was the man who oversaw the launch of CBeebies at the BBC in 2000 who first spotted *Waybuloo's* potential. After 16 years in children's television, Nigel Pickard spent three years as the director of programmes at ITV (2002-05) before moving in 2006 to the independent television production company RDF, in charge of its children's wing, the Foundation. A month into his new job, Pickard was sent illustrations of characters for a show by Dan Good. Good had spent much of the previous decade reviving 1970s and 1980s characters such as Bagpuss and Basil Brush, but at that stage hadn't seen any of his own creations made into a series.

'There was something about [Dan's characters] – an innocence and a magic,' Pickard says. 'And the idea was genuinely different. Dan had a clear vision of what he wanted the show to be. He believes passionately in citizenship, co-operation, a shared sense of joy, friendship. All pre-school shows use "soft" learning. This one was slightly hippyish – like me.'

It was called "Way to Blue" at that point, which referred to the moment the Piplings' achieve perfect harmony, levitate and do amazing acrobatics in the sky. We wanted to keep the spirit of that, but come up with a name that reflects the Piplings' simple language – a distinctive, unique word like *Teletubbies*, *Tweenies* or *Pingu* – and which doesn't have to be translated when it's shown around the world. The final characters are pretty faithful



'The budget meant we could create a world on a filmic scale. It is a film set, really'

Left Yogo with Dè Li. **Right** the series designer Tom Sayer in discussion with the sculptor Shirley Sweeny and scenic artist Lynsey Sinnamon

to the first drawings, though on a different scale.' Another appealing element, Pickard says, was the prototype's inclusiveness. 'A lot of pre-school shows don't allow children into their world, and this one did, or at least gave the illusion of real children interacting with the show's characters.'

Pickard asked Good to shoot a test-piece, putting animation and action together – Good's son acted in it, and the animation took the form of cut-out cardboard figures. A young composer, James Burrell, provided New Age-style, not obviously child-friendly music. With Kew Gardens as a backdrop – 'we wanted an oriental feel' – many of the final elements were in place.

In 2007 CBeebies was on the lookout for a new flagship show – something required every three or four years – and had invited independent and in-house producers to submit ideas. (It needed to be a home-grown production. Unlike many other dedicated children's channels in Britain, CBeebies buys British – 95 per cent of its output originates here.) Of the many put forward, *Waybuloo* caused the greatest excitement.

Michael Carrington, the then controller of CBeebies, loved the characters and the music, and *Waybuloo* was commissioned a few months later. The faith invested in the show paid off from the start. It swiftly became apparent that children were mesmerised by it. Within a few months of the first broadcast, while the animation was still being applied to later episodes, Carrington had commissioned a new series of another 50 episodes.

In the meantime, the first *Waybuloo* merchandise began to be rolled out – initially soft toys and books, secured against the strong possibility of the series' success. By the end of 2009 there was a *Waybuloo* magazine (published by the BBC) and a *Waybuloo* website; a talking *Waybuloo* doll became one of the sell-out toys of last Christmas.

Licensing and merchandising for pre-school shows can be lucrative. The *Teletubbies* franchise is estimated to have been worth £500 million, while *Peppa Pig*, a jolly cartoon about a bossy piglet, is shown in 180 countries and last year grossed more than £100 million. It takes two to three years to develop a brand – *Peppa Pig*, another British

success, has been running since 2004 – so it's still early days for *Waybuloo*, with no official financial figures yet published. But the show is already shown in 79 countries.

'It's a very tricky market at the moment and quite cut-throat,' says Jane Kennedy, senior licensing manager at RDF Rights, in charge of nurturing the *Waybuloo* brand. 'A lot of brands don't work – they're in and out of shops in a season.'

The number of licensees for a successful series range from about 15 to 50. *Waybuloo* currently has 35, from Fisher-Price for toys to Egmont Publishing for books. A clothing range launched in April: pyjamas, socks, sleepsuits and hoodies are variously available from Next, Matalan, Mothercare, Marks & Spencer and Debenhams. There's also a charming Peek-a Play Tent (with pagoda-style roof), armbands and pools, a Peek-a Lau Lau playset and much more to come.

After feedback from parents that children love to copy the Yogo moves, RDF recently launched an album of music, *Time for Yogo*, that went to number one in the iTunes chart (a downloadable leaflet was available so that children could perform moves to the music). 'In 2011-12 we're looking to highlight Yogo toys,' Kennedy says. 'There's been a big spontaneous response to what we do.'

But the response has not been entirely positive. As part of the publicity for the show's launch, the BBC declared that '*Waybuloo* is not just a series, it's a philosophy for a happy life.' Certain Christian groups took offence, and jumped in – particularly in online forums – to attack what they perceived to be the overt promotion of aspects of Buddhism and Hinduism, such as meditation and levitation.

It is not only religious groups that have been disturbed by some of the programme's overtones. One otherwise agnostic father whose 18-month-old watches *Waybuloo* told me, 'I find it spooky. All those crystals and New Agey stuff – it smacks of a semi-religious cult.' Another parent told me that she is 'a bit creeped out' when her two-year-old attempts the yoga moves.

Dirk Campbell, the lead director of *Waybuloo*, who also directed all 100 episodes of *In the Night Garden*, believes that adults and children respond

quite differently to the programme. 'An adult audience seems to find both *In the Night Garden* and *Waybuloo* totally mystifying. They don't get it, they don't know what it's about. They sometimes don't even see what's interesting about it, while children seem completely mesmerised.'

Spencer agrees that adults and children have reacted in different ways. 'The Piplings float and they're harmonious; the ethos of how they live is puzzling to adults,' he says. But he takes a more robust stance on the Christian criticism: '*Waybuloo* is a pre-school entertainment series, not a religious programme. The programme's primary focus is on exploring social, emotional and physical development from a young child's perspective, not to endorse any sort of theology.'

Rather than get embroiled in a religious argument, Spencer prefers to focus on the positives and is enjoying *Waybuloo*'s success while it lasts. 'Very few brands last for ever,' he says. 'But you can't consider that. You don't even know if kids will like the show till it gets out there. You're trying new characters, new music, a new style and a new format. Your only safeguard is putting together a team of highly experienced professionals who don't underestimate the specialities of pre-school.'

In the 16 months since *Waybuloo* launched, the first 50 episodes have run thrice daily on CBeebies (including during the all-important bedtime hour), repeated again and again. The second batch of 50 began transmission two weeks ago, and will be followed by the second series in a year's time.

Waybuloo is likely to become a benchmark for future children's television and, given everything that has gone into it, deserves the accolade. Spencer considers himself lucky to have worked on it. 'I've specialised in pre-school now for 10 years, and it's the last thing I thought I'd end up doing. Yet it's so rewarding, both on the level of trying to give something back – without wishing to sound too worthy – and the creative opportunities. You get to work with big budgets and high production values.'

'I don't have children myself, but I've learnt a lot about childhood and pre-schoolers. I really see and understand and relate to them in a way I never thought I would.' ■