

## Backyard fun

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By Denette Wilford

### The Backyardigans coming to you onscreen and on stage



Round up the kids! The Backyardigans hit the stage

The Backyardigans are everywhere — department stores, drugstores, supermarkets and, of course, toy stores, but for some reason, I'm OK with that.

Since I'm the parent of a three-year-old (going on 23, but whatever), the Backyardigans are all over my house — on plates, cups, bowling balls and pins, and contribute to her overflowing bookcase. And let's not even talk about all the dolls, whether they're stuffed, talking, or meant for the bath.

But as a parent, it's hard not to love them. Whenever I turn on Treehouse — and soon Nickelodeon when the channel comes to Canada on Nov. 2 — I've got my fingers crossed that *The Backyardigans* are on.

It's an animated musical-adventure series following five friends — Pablo, Tyrone, Uniqua, Tasha, and Austin — who use their imaginations to change their backyard into new and exciting worlds.

The characters are delightful, the songs are infectious and the stories are fun and interesting; it may sound cliché, but it's a show for kids that adults can enjoy.

*The Backyardigans* debuted in 2004, but it seems to never get old. For a kids' program, that's amazing in itself, but it begs the question, how can that be?

"I really like the show, I like the characters, I like doing music and dancing and it seems like there's always some new story that you can tell that just surprises yourself, once you start thinking," says *Backyardigans* creator Janice Burgess.

"At the beginning of every season, you're like, 'Oh my God, what am I going to do?' But before you know it, we're like, 'We didn't get the chance

to do the giant robots. We'll have to do it next time.' There's always something."

And because the show is such a success, it hasn't only spawned books and other kid paraphernalia, but also a Canada-wide stage show.

This year marks the second live show by Koba Entertainment, a leading producer of original family musicals. Its newest production is *The Backyardigans: Sea Deep in Adventure*, which takes audiences into an underwater musical adventure with everyone's favourite backyard quintet.

"When we did our first Backyardigans production, we had a section in the show that was underwater, so I took that nugget and expanded it into a whole show under the water," says Patti Caplette, artistic director and writer of the live production.

"Because there's so many adventures in the TV episodes that include the underwater aspect, I think it was really, really effective on stage."

It sounds like the perfect thing for kids of all ages. But if you're worried your little one won't have the stamina to last an entire show, or sit still for that long, fear not.

"They will be up dancing! In our shows, there's no sitting allowed," laughs Caplette. "You're standing up, you're dancing, you're really enjoying the theatre for what it's intended for; I've had my 18-month-old grandchild there mesmerized."



Burgess (l) and Caplette specialize in kiddie fun

"We keep it at 28, 30 minutes a half, and it's just enough for them to get from the opening to that moment of closure of the first act, then they can go off and have a water break and visit to the bathroom and whatever they may need to do," laughs Caplette.

"Then they come back for the finale. The pace is kept really quite swift because we have about 20 songs that we do. It's very, very musical, it's very interactive and colourful and the characters themselves are so entertaining. They're just great – I love them."

It also helps that the stage show is as close to the television show as possible, thanks to Caplette, who is a self-proclaimed "true believer in exacting as much as possible" from the series.

Everything's there, from the characters' voices ("the exact same artists who provide it for the television show") to the scripts ("Janice would send back some very, very succinct notes and comments"), to the colours and shapes ("it's exact from the style guide palette of the Backyardigans") and even the sets ("everything is approved through Nelvana and Nickelodeon, so it really is the world of the Backyardigans that will be there on stage").

So what's up next for the Backyardigans? Aside from the final dates of the live show, which concludes in November (Koba begins working on its Franklin production soon after), there is a fourth season of the TV series. And just when you think the show has tackled everything ...

"For Season 4, we're doing a ragtime show," says Burgess. "We live in a giant universe, a giant world full of all sorts of things. There are always styles that are out there to be mined."

*The Backyardigans* airs weekdays 7 p.m. ET, Treehouse. *The Backyardigans: Sea Deep in Adventure* finished its cross-Canada tour in Ontario, Quebec, New Brunswick, Nova Scotia and Newfoundland. Check Ticketmaster for a day and time near you.

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