





FAR FROM EXTINCT

Bruce Mactaggart and Brad Parsons bring dinosaurs to life

by DAVE BROOKS



Because of their sheer space and height, America's arenas have an untapped potential for acts that can literally raise the roof.

While it can be hard to book talent that provides a full show from floor to ceiling, Bruce Mactaggart and Brad Parsons have introduced a new touring phenomenon that pushes the arena show to new heights — or at least a 50-foot ceiling clearance.

This year, Mactaggart and Parsons are being honored with the *Venues Today* Hall of Headlines Award for Bookings with their widely popular "Walking With Dinosaurs — The Live Experience." Using 15 animatronic dinosaurs, including a freakishly real Tyrannosaurus Rex, the pair have created an act that can look fans directly in the eyes — even if they're sitting in the upper bowl.

"That was part of the journey, to come up with something completely new for arenas," said Mactaggart, a long-time Australian arena operator who recently helped open the Vector Arena in Auckland, New Zealand. "We began to develop the notion of 'edutainment.' Dinosaurs were something universal and wonderful and we knew we could create a show that was valuable, viable and different."

Six years and \$20 million later, the show has proven to be a big hit in the states. Parsons said the show has grossed \$29 million in the U.S. and sold over 500,000 tickets during its 17-week run in 16 markets.

"In the genre of family shows, the grosses we are achieving are off the charts," said Mactaggart.

The show's North American run has been coordinated by Parsons' ArenaNetwork, a consortium of major arenas in the U.S. and Canada. Unlike other shows, Parsons said his team and subsidiary Arena Touring worked to co-promote the show with local facilities. The ArenaNetwork team worked closely with individual marketing departments to share resources for media buys and publicity events.

"It's no longer a situation where the promoter calls and gets the building's rent figures and then takes off," Parsons said. "We're working really closely with the venues and using their knowledge. That has been a huge benefit that has come out of managing arenas. I understand the problems from the venue perspective."

Moreover, Mactaggart added that his show is based on the premise of "Think globally, act locally."

"We've got a major international show developed by major creative talent from all over the world and that magnitude of talent could only happen if you take a global perspective. Similarly, when developing the marketing and all the tools that come along with it, we engage the buildings by taking the global presence and look to the local markets to share their knowledge of the opportunities. It's their market and they live in it all day, every day," Mactaggart said.

When the show hit the Spokane (Wash.) Veterans Memorial Arena, the facility's marketing team arranged for a dinosaur float to be in a local parade several weeks prior to opening.

"You don't get those type of initiatives unless you have strong local involvement," Parsons said.

Rob Henson of the Tacoma (Wash.) Dome was the first U.S. arena to host the show in North America. After hearing about the show from Parsons, Henson got on a plane and flew to Sydney to preview the performance.

"Immediately I totally got what he was trying to do, it was more than I ever thought it would be," he said. "Bruce is not a kind of guy that is going to come to a building and squeeze the building and then leave town. He told me that if he can leave it better than when he found it, then his mission had been successful. I had never heard a promoter talk like that."

Walking with Dinosaurs spent a month at the Tacoma Dome, rehearsing and tightening the product for North American audiences. Henson said, in that time, his staff grew very close to Mactaggart and his production team. He said he's still impressed at how much interest the show drew in.

"It's an amazing product because there are so many marketing and public relations opportunities — it is a publicity machine," Henson said.

The show has also been a boon for ArenaNetwork, which has worked to develop content for arena shows.

"Our mantra is real simple. I'm just here to help them find more stuff to do in their buildings that makes profitable sense," Parsons said. "The touring industry is changing and the Rolling Stones and Paul McCartney, God bless them, aren't going to be able to do it much longer so we have to find new things to do."

BOOKINGS