



Dave Elsey, *Farscape* Puppetmaster

By Stewart Taggart

special to *SPACE.com*

posted: 07:12 pm ET

16 February 2000

▼advertisement

SYDNEY, Australia -- When the second season of the hit SciFi channel series *Farscape* goes to air, audiences will see a completely rebuilt set of puppets, including such key figures as Rygel and Pilot.

"If we've done our job properly, people won't even notice," says the series' puppet chief, Dave Elsey. "Our aim is to get the audience to forget they're looking at foam latex, and instead experience the puppets as real characters."

Elsey is in charge of designing and maintaining up to 50 different creatures for the show, ranging from ongoing characters like [Rygel](#) and Pilot, to "guest" aliens who appear in just one episode, or on a particular planet.

During the break between seasons, Elsey and his crew improved some of the less visible mechanics of the characters, like cabling and computerized remote controls.

On-screen, each puppet is controlled simultaneously by as many as six puppeteers, some sliding around on skateboards beneath them.

"It's a wonderful job. All day long I get to think about aliens. And I get paid for it."

That foam ticking takes a licking

But since the creatures sometimes get hit by water or planted in mud during filming, wear and tear is rapid. In fact, the puppets take such a beating full facial reconstruction of each is done roughly every 2-3 episodes from master sculpture molds.

But these are the hazards of sci-fi show business, shrugs Elsey, who proudly notes the tricky puppets haven't significantly slowed down *Farscape's* tight production schedule.

Indeed, this season will show the puppets in their best-ever form.

"You're going to be seeing a better, even more believable set of puppets," he said. "The lip synching will look better, the cosmetics will be better, everything will be better."

One of the biggest challenges will be a more ambitious set of movements for Pilot.

"He will look same, but we'll see more of him," Elsey said. "In the first season, he was kind of like a newsreader in that you could almost forget he had legs. That will change this season."

A makeover for D'Argo

As for [D'Argo](#), Elsey and his crew have made a series of refinements aimed at making the role easier for actor Anthony Simcoe, who must endure as much as three hours of makeup preparation and removal each filming day.

"D'Argo has had a major overhaul to fix certain things we wanted to change last season, and to make Anthony more comfortable," Elsey said.

"Perhaps most importantly, we've changed his coloring a bit. At the end of last season, he was left [floating in space](#), and this season we'll see how that affected him."

While Elsey was evasive about storylines for the new season, he did say we'll learn a lot more about the characters' pasts before they hooked up with marooned astronaut [John Crichton](#).

"We're also going to meet a whole array of very strange new aliens, and we've done some very innovative stuff," Elsey said. "We have some very big aliens this season, some are 7-8 foot tall bipedals."

Dropped into an alien world

Elsey has worked on and off since 1985 with the Jim Henson Company, co-producers of *Farscape*.

After initially working on the film *Little Shop of Horrors*, Elsey later worked on special effects in the Indiana Jones and Alien series before being drafted by Henson to come to Australia to head up *Farscape's* puppet operations.

"I arrived here about 3-4 weeks before production started in the first season, and I really didn't know much about the show until I started unpacking the puppet crates," he said.

"It was only then I found out that the puppets were only partially finished, and that the space show takes place so far away the only earthling we ever meet is John Crichton."

"I had to crew up quickly in something akin to an indoor car park," he said. "What's more, everything out here in Australia went by a different name than I was used to, and certain [rubber and chemical] mixtures were slightly different."

"It was enough to make me feel a bit like John Crichton myself, dropped into an alien world filled with people and materials I'd never worked with before," he said.

Everyone loves the puppets

But Elsey said he lucked out in picking an excellent crew to man the puppets that works well together and with the actors. Indeed, actress [Claudia Black](#), who plays space trooper [Aeryn Sun](#), is one of the group's biggest fans.

"I hardly have to use my imagination at all in working with the puppets," she said. "The puppeteers bring them to life so much they're sometimes more real than human beings."

To Elsey, the toughest part of the job is keeping puppeteers' heads, arms or other control devices out of the shots. But one of the best parts of the job are when the puppets flub their lines -- just like humans -- giving everyone a good laugh.

"It's a wonderful job," Elsey said. "All day long I get to think about aliens. And I get paid for it."

What do you think? Send your comments to the [author](#) or [editor](#).

More Stories
■ The SPACE.com Guide to Farscape
■ Claudia Black on Farscape, Pitch Black
■ Rygel XVI
■ Farscape Premiere Paints in Broad, Bright Strokes

Related Links
■ Henson Productions
■ Farscape