

# The Power of Three

Texas Exes bring classic novella *Flatland* to the screen ★ by Dana Mackenzie

IMAGINE LIVING IN A TWO-DIMENSIONAL WORLD, a world with no up or down — only north, east, south, and west. Would you be able to conceive of a third dimension, a reality that transcended your plane of existence? And if you could, how would you explain it to other people? What effect would it have on society?

These are the questions that an English theologian and writer named Edwin Abbott grappled with more than a century ago. In 1884, Abbott wrote a book called *Flatland*, which tells the story of a square, who lives in the two-dimensional world of Flatland, and a sphere who tries to convince the square that the third dimension is real.

Last year, three Texas alumni gave Abbott's allegory a 21st-century makeover. Director Jeffrey Travis, BS '93, MS '95, producer Seth Caplan, BA '99, BS '02, and director/animator Dano Johnson, BA '01, BS '01, released *Flatland: The Movie*, a 35-minute animation that features some very recognizable voices: Martin Sheen as Arthur Square, Michael York as Spherius, and Kristen Bell as Arthur Square's ever-curious granddaughter, Hex.

Don't look for *Flatland* in your local theater. Your kids are more likely to see it in their math classes, because Caplan's unique marketing program has directly targeted the movie's most important audience — grade-school and high-school math teachers, and the children they teach.

"If you inspire kids and give them that spark, that's when the learning is going to happen," says Caplan. "The biggest problems facing the world today are math and science problems, things like renewable energy and global warming. The people who are going to solve those problems are in high school right now, and they're not going to be inspired by tests."



From left, Dano Johnson, Jeffrey Travis, and Seth Caplan.

Images courtesy Flatland: The Movie



But they will be inspired by *Flatland*. Caplan has received letters from as far away as Australia, from kids and parents of kids who have watched the movie and started asking questions they had never asked before, like: What is the fourth dimension?

It's an experience all three filmmakers can relate to because they all read Abbott's book in high school. Caplan even read it two years in a row. "It showed me the imagination in math, which maybe isn't utilized enough around the world," he says.

Of the three collaborators, Travis took the most circuitous route to movie-making. At UT, he earned a bachelor's and master's in electrical engineering. But, he says, "I couldn't find myself getting excited about working from 9 to 6 in a cubicle." For a while he worked for an educational publishing company, but in 2001 he started playing around with film.

"I joined a group in 2002 called Project Seven, a group of amateur filmmakers, some of whom had been to film school, who decided that the best way to learn is simply by doing," Travis says. The group gave each other assignments. One of Travis' shorts was such a hit with his peers that they urged him to take it to film festivals. An executive at the Fox Network saw it and invited Travis to write a pilot for a TV series.

"It was called 'Except for Danny,'" Travis says. "It was about a family of overachievers, whose youngest son, Danny, is just normal. He draws these very crude drawings, and this stick man comes alive and becomes Danny's guardian angel. It's kind of a *Calvin and Hobbes* parallel."

The pilot never became a series. "In the end, Fox thought the audience would be too young for what they were doing," Travis says. But the project did bring Travis together with Caplan and Johnson for the first time. He hired Caplan to produce the pilot, and Caplan brought in Johnson as a production assistant.

"I was a child of PBS," says Johnson. "My parents would let me watch *Sesame Street*, *Mister Rogers*, and *Reading Rainbow*, and nothing else. Jim Henson was my hero, and it was always a dream of mine to someday work with Jim Henson or do something comparable."

At UT, Johnson studied radio-TV-film and the Plan II Honors Program. He landed an internship with the Sesame Workshop — a big step towards his childhood dream.

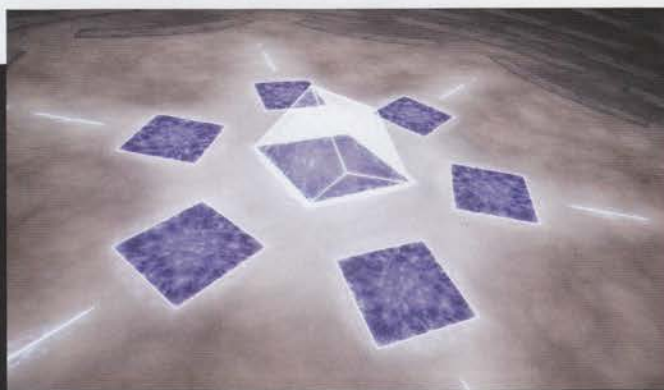
Unfortunately, when Johnson graduated in 2001, Sesame Workshop was laying off people, not hiring. For a while he worked on videos for an educational publisher, but in 2004 he quit and became a freelance animator. "Then Seth called me from out of the blue," Johnson says.

Caplan, too, had been a Plan II and film major at UT, and had known Johnson as a student. Both had put in long hours at KVR-TV, as Texas Student Television was then known. Caplan graduated in 1999 and helped found an Austin company called Ignite! Learning. (See *THE ALCALDE*, May/June 2002.) The company was a big success — "It now has 75 employees and offices downtown, and I'm still a partial owner," Caplan

says — but after a while he realized that he really wanted to try producing feature films. He set out for Hollywood and the American Film Institute.

"After my first year of film school, I recognized that a producer becomes successful because he owns a property — a script, a novel, a TV show, a comic book," Caplan says. But what could a fledgling producer own? "I couldn't afford to buy the newest Michael Crichton novel," he says. So he pulled out a box of books left over from high school. And there was *Flatland*. In the public domain, free of charge, a story he had loved as a kid.

By December 2004, the *Flatland* team was together. "None of us knew what we





were taking on. We thought we'd be done in six months!" Travis says. It took them a year and a half to write the script, and then came the hard part: getting the actors. "Our executive producer, Will Wallace, knew Martin Sheen, and was able to contact him directly," Travis says. "Once Martin was on board, the other actors said, 'Yeah, we're in.'" Amazingly, Travis, a first-time director, had landed exactly the actors he wanted for the lead roles. "It was a dream come true," he says. "It was a little intimidating, but what impressed me most was that the actors took this very, very seriously."

"The day that we were going to record, I showed up way early, at 7:30 in the morning, and Martin was already there," Caplan says. "He was going over his script, highlighting it, internalizing it. What a professional he is! He really took to the aspects of the story that involve questioning power and critical thought."

Indeed, Abbott's story was about much more than mathematics — it was a social commentary. Abbott's Flatland is a rigidly structured class system, with circles at the top and triangles and squares at the bottom. Women, who are only line segments, are the lowest of all. The discovery that there is something higher than a circle — a sphere — threatens the power of the circles.

Travis, Caplan, and Johnson made a few changes. First, they made women into polygons. "You can't expect children now to understand the satire — what was Victorian society, and why were women treated this way?" Caplan says. Arthur Square's grandson becomes a granddaughter, Hex. And, in the long tradition of book-to-movie adaptation, the ending becomes much more upbeat. But the central premise is the same: "A guy who is caught between getting along ... and truth, which we cannot get along without," says Sheen in an interview on the DVD.

Besides promoting *Flatland*, Caplan and Travis are working on new feature films, while Johnson is producing animated shorts and videos. They are all open to the possibility of a sequel. "With the phenomenal response to *Flatland*, there's definitely a market," says Caplan. "With any project this long, you kind of bond and become a family," says Travis. "I would love to work with either of them again."

*Dana Mackenzie, a former mathematics professor at Duke University and Kenyon College, is now a freelance writer based in Santa Cruz.*

## 160,000 Eyes of Texas

With 80,000 readers, that's how many eyeballs will be on your ad when you advertise in **THE ALCALDE**. Reach well-educated, affluent potential customers. Online rate cards at:

[www.TexasExes.org/news/advertise.aspx](http://www.TexasExes.org/news/advertise.aspx)

The **ALCALDE**

**TEXAS EXES**  
"El Gabriel blows his horn"



Introducing longhorn designs by James Avery — perfect gifts for the new graduate, special student or alum in your life.



**James Avery**

[www.jamesavery.com](http://www.jamesavery.com)  
800 283-1770

Longhorn Key Chain (1 1/4" long) sterling silver \$65. Longhorn Charm (1/2" wide) sterling silver \$30, 14K gold \$85 — shown on our cable chain, sold separately.  
© 2008 James Avery Craftsman, Inc. Prices subject to change without notice.