

THE PRIME TIME ANIMATED TELEVISION SERIES

and the creation and making of NBC's

FATHER OF THE PRIDE

by Kate McCallum

Cheryl Hines as Kate and John Goodman as Larry in NBC's *Father of The Pride*. PHOTO: DreamWorks Animation



Oftentimes in the world of development, the “great idea” might be one generated by a non-writing entity, i.e. a development executive, producer, director or star. Such was the case with this season's new NBC animated comedy series *Father of The Pride*, a CGI program targeted to adults and born from the mind of industry legend Jeffrey Katzenberg. John Goodman (*Roseanne*), Cheryl Hines (*Curb Your Enthusiasm*), Emmy®-winner Carl Reiner (*The Dick Van Dyke Show*) and Orlando Jones (*Magnolia*) lend their talents to the half-hour series that was inspired by much of the stylistic humor in the highly successful DreamWorks hits *Shrek* and *Shrek 2*.

Set in Las Vegas, *Father of The Pride* centers on the family life of Larry (voiced by Goodman), a down-to-earth, hard-working lion who somehow fell into show business. After falling in love and marrying the beautiful lioness Kate (voiced by Hines), Larry must endure daily taunting from his father-in-law, the legendary headliner Sarmoti (voiced by Reiner), who was first discovered in Africa by Siegfried & Roy. The now aging star, Sarmoti, is constantly at odds with his son-in-law over such issues as Larry's disregard for the old

Rat Pack-era values or how Larry parents his two cubs—rebellious 15-year-old daughter Sierra (voiced by Danielle Andrea Harris, *Rugrats Go Wild!*) and awkward nine-year-old son Hunter (voiced by Daryl Sabara, *Spy Kids*). Joining Larry and his family in this “man-made” jungle of lions, tigers and showbiz is his scheming best friend, Snack the gopher (voiced by Jones). Rounding out the cast are the snooty white tigers Blake and Victoria (voiced by John O'Hurley, *Seinfeld* and Wendie Malick, *Just Shoot Me!*). CGI versions of Siegfried & Roy (voiced by Julian Holloway, *My Uncle Silas* and David Herman, *Office Space*) are featured in the series.

Jeffrey Katzenberg is a principal partner in DreamWorks SKG, the studio he co-founded with Steven Spielberg and David Geffen in October, 1994. He also serves as executive producer for NBC's new unscripted drama series *The Contender*. Under Katzenberg's leadership, DreamWorks Animation division has enjoyed several successes, most recently including *Shrek 2*, the sequel to the computer-animated blockbuster *Shrek*, on which Katzenberg also served as executive producer. *Shrek* also won the first Academy Award® ever presented for Best

Animated Feature as well as Best Animated Film awards from a number of critics' organizations, including the Broadcast Film Critics and the Los Angeles Film Critics. The film also earned Golden Globe and Producers Guild Award nominations and is the third-highest-grossing animated feature of all time. Katzenberg more recently produced the traditionally animated *Spirit: Stallion of The Cimarron*, which earned an Oscar® nomination for Best Animated Feature. DreamWorks Animation most recently had major success with *Shark Tale* and is presently in production on several film projects, including *Madagascar* and a feature-length *Wallace & Gromit* movie due out in 2005.

But even with all Katzenberg's expertise, he knew that in order to successfully set up a TV series deal, he would need a showrunner. Jonathan Groff was just that person. Before serving as executive producer/co-creator for *Father of The Pride*, Groff was executive producer/creator of *The Jake Effect*, a single-camera comedy series. In 2001 to 2002, he served as consulting producer on *Ed*. From 1995 to 2000, Groff served as head writer at *Late Night With Conan O'Brien*, during which time the show received five Emmy-Award nominations for Best Writing in a Comedy, Variety or Music Series. The *Late Night* staff also received two Writers Guild Awards during Groff's tenure. He was one of the original staff writers on *The Jon Stewart Show* on MTV in 1993.

Writer Jon Pollack came aboard as an additional executive producer. Before serving as executive producer on *Father of The Pride*, Pollack was an executive producer on *Just Shoot Me!* Prior to that, Pollack spent three years at *Spin City* where he served as producer.

scr(i)pt: *What a fun and fresh idea. How did you come up with it?*

JEFFREY KATZENBERG: Well, it started after the first *Shrek* movie came out when Jeff Zucker (president of NBC Universal Television Group) approached me and was interested in trying to do a CGI-animated prime time half-hour. At the time, the technology was at a place where it actually wasn't possible—at least not to do it at the quality level that he was looking for and with which we would want to associate. He kept asking me about it every six months or so. About a year and a half ago, I finally said to him, "Well, Jeff, actually, because of the advancements that have been made, it is now possible to do." He said, "I still would love to do it, and I think it would be exciting and different and fresh and unlike anything people are seeing on television. So, if you guys come up with a good idea, we're in."

I started thinking about it. I was in Las Vegas seeing the Siegfried & Roy Show for the umpteenth time and was just sort of day dreaming. I'm not quite sure why, but I started to think about the incredible animals up there on the stage and their world and life. I had been privy to much of [the animals' world] because Siegfried & Roy, whom I'd known over the years, had shown me where they live and the facilities they have for them. They literally created and built this place called "The Secret Garden," which is an entire complex where the animals live, are trained, exercise and rehearse for their show. It just all sort of came together that moment in which I thought, well, wouldn't that be interesting to do an allegory—to create a world that exists within our world seen from the point of view of, particularly,

the lions. They live in Las Vegas, have a family life and are trying to raise their kids. They go to work every day and are working for these two very eccentric bosses in this pretty extraordinary world of Vegas.

scr(i)pt: *That's great. Inventive.*

JK: So, that's kind of what we started with. I just sketched an outline for that idea and did some visual development with our creative team here at DreamWorks. I then approached Jonathan Groff, as I very much admired his writing which is witty, fast, satirical and sophisticated. I thought his sense of humor had just the right sensibility for this project. Fortunately, he loved the idea. We then hooked up with Jon Pollack and assembled one of the most amazing groups of writers with whom I've ever worked—very witty and good storytellers.

scr(i)pt: *How many writers are there on staff?*

JK: Twelve. We then got incredibly brilliant recording stars/actors to do the voices, which I think is such an important part of animation.

scr(i)pt: *Did you run the concept by Jeff Zucker first?*

JK: No, we actually went to work on it for some time with Jonathan and Jon and our people here. I wanted us to really have worked it out in great detail before we pitched it because we were doing something so new and different and unfamiliar, and it was going to require them to make a leap of faith and probably a bigger financial commitment than they've ever done before. We worked for a couple of months putting together character designs, casting the show and working out some detailed stories—designing the world and what it was going to look like. When we ultimately presented it to the network, we were able to give them great insight into what the show was going to be and look and sound like; the style of animation; who the cast was. They basically had to commit to 13 episodes on a pitch because of the cost factor.

scr(i)pt: *Right, and you didn't even run the area by him just to see if it was clearable or intriguing? You wanted to surprise him?*

JK: Yes, I took him to Las Vegas about a year and a half ago.

scr(i)pt: *Were Siegfried & Roy active participants in developing this?*

JK: Oh, yes. They helped pitch the show. They hosted us in Las Vegas and gave us a tour of The Secret Garden. We took all the NBC executives to their show.

scr(i)pt: *You brought them to Vegas, did the whole show thing and tour; they saw the content; you had the writers and the voices cast—what happened?*

JK: They said yes immediately.

CUT TO:

scr(i)pt: *In my earlier conversation with Jeffrey Katzenberg, he told me a bit about the background of how the idea for F.O.P. was born. He raved about you both. From the point of your all getting together in the room, what happened after you heard the idea?*

JONATHAN GROFF: I came on first in early March of 2003. At

that time there was some early artwork, a three to four-page sort of outline of the basic idea with some of the characters who were in the show now and also other ones that didn't seem to really stand up under the scrutiny of who really needs to be in the show. I worked on that [outline] and added a character, which is Snack the gopher voiced by Orlando Jones. My job was to find people to help me do this show, and the first person I brought on was Jon Pollack who was coming off *Just Shoot Me!* and *Spin City*. With some consultation from Jon, recommendations and meetings, we put together the staff, got together in early May of '03 and started to ask what is this show and what do we want to do? We refined some of the ideas that had already been developed and then really fleshed out the world. What is this story of a working family of white lions who live in this compound—this kind of gated community and work in this field—but also are a working family in a gated community in a company town? The company is run by these eccentric CEOs, Siegfried & Roy. It was really a process unusual for television because we had not written a pilot. This was sold on an idea.

Then it was a question of establishing the characters, the rules. Do the animals talk to Siegfried & Roy? What is the family dynamic? Who is Larry?—all the basic questions that you think about when you're doing a show with these added elements of tone. Who is the target audience, who is the customer that is buying it—which is NBC—and what has their tradition been in television? How does CGI animation affect the way you write the show?

We feel that there's a sort of hybrid of live action and animation that makes us different from 2-D or from a live-action sitcom. We take that into consideration in terms of having a real, emotional moment because the acting is so sophisticated. On the other hand, we can do a lot of cartoon stuff, like talking animals and the physical things—falls, visual stuff that allows you to go further than you can in live action.

It's interesting because while you're thinking about all these larger issues, you begin saying let's start to tell a story. How does that story take shape? We actually had some early ideas for the pilot episode before we even got together with the writers—the idea, like, Larry should get the job from Sarmoti, his father-in-law, in the first episode.

JON POLLACK: Then that ended up not being the first episode.

JG: Actually, even before we got the writing staff assembled, we had several meetings with Jeffrey. He would invite friends of the studio, like Seth MacFarlane from *Family Guy*, to come by and pitch out some ideas on what he thought about the show. We also pitched to Steven Spielberg who had really interesting comments, and he gave us one major adjustment that I loved. We originally had the lion Larry and his family living in splendor in this kind of Vegas star setting. Steven suggested we scale them down, give them something to strive for and make their circumstances more modest. Even though they were very well-treated by Siegfried & Roy, give them more of a middle-class existence. That actually played into what was one of our central ideas: The lions are the working-class guys who haul the mail in the show and do the tricks and the stunts. The tigers are these hedonistic, sybaritic, decadent, aristocratic do-nothings who just look beautiful. Having something to aspire to actually played a little bit into our development of Kate's character who is more status conscious. Actually, her father Sarmoti is very status conscious. He's the hardest one on hating tigers—"They're scum, worthless lazy scum; and I'm this 'salt of the earth, Vegas Rat Pack, up from the school of hard knocks' kind of guy."

scr(i)pt: *At what point did NBC ask you to write for a certain demographic; or did you all come up with it, and how did you target the tone of the show?*

JG: First of all, they hired us. Jeffrey hired a guy with *Late Night With Conan O'Brien* and *Ed* credits—sitcoms that I developed that were 18 to 34, 18 to 49 skewing. Jon worked on these really funny, adult, fast-paced, multi-camera shows for the last three years—big, funny jokes and adult characters, not family shows. We also felt that making it overly family-friendly and cuddly would not be the prescription for success on NBC.

JP: Also, the animation-for-kid's market is so well-served by Nickelodeon and all these different shows. There is no prime-time animated show that isn't for adults. It just doesn't exist on network.

JG: They're *King of The Hill*, *Family Guy*, *The Simpsons* ...

JP: If you want to look at it from a business standpoint, to us it was a no-brainer that it had to be skewed to adults. We didn't come in saying what would be the right target for the show. Our sensibilities are very adult. The writing staff we hired are writers from *South Park*, *Family Guy*, *King of The Hill* and *The Simpsons*.

JG: *Futurama*.

JP: [We had a] staff of people who all were interested in adult material. Then, Jonathan described at a high level the way you begin to get the skeleton of a show. But the reality is, anybody who's developed a TV show knows that what you think it's going to be when you start is very different from what it ends up being. It's a combination of the basic framework with the acting talent. It's the writers and how all of it comes together. In animation, you also have the extra element of the animation talent and the directing talent. In all honesty, from my perspective it all comes down to one thing, which is, when are you laughing? Comedy is like this wonderful free market where the show starts to veer toward the funniest places when you start developing them. What's interesting in this process is that, usually, by the time you figure out a show, it's the seventh or eighth episode ... and by that point, oftentimes the network has lost interest in really supporting it. We were lucky because we had 13. We had a year to do them.

scr(i)pt: *Yes, that is great. A luxury.*

JP: I would say we really started to find the show in the third through sixth episodes. We had this advantage in that we were able to go back and actually rework the first couple of episodes—to use what we'd learned. You have these great moments of revelation when you're in this process—character-defining moments—when you suddenly figure out who and what a character is. Then it becomes easy to write. Like Carl Reiner's character, Sarmoti's defining moment I remember specifically. We were working on the pilot; and we needed to do a moment with him backstage before the show, and we just walked into this idea, "What would Frank Sinatra do in this moment?" We knew he was interested in the Rat Pack, but we just said, "He's Frank Sinatra. What does he do? What's his attitude toward women, toward show business, toward drinking? He parties. He's old school." Suddenly, the character became clear and it became easy to write him. With the character, Hunter, the son, we didn't figure him out until maybe the eighth episode, or fifth or sixth episode, and then it was he's this odd, nerdy kid who's obsessed with *The Lord of The Rings*; and that started getting us into these really interesting places. With Larry, I think the defining moment was when we did an episode where Kate, his wife, wants him to be more fun; and he ends up stealing the tigers' big-screen TV set.

JG: I totally agree.

JP: —It was this huge moment where we said Larry is this impulsive guy who lives in the moment and never thinks about a decision that he's going to make until after the fact. He's a lion. He's in the moment. He's instinctive ... but he's not dumb.

JG: He sees something and he pounces.

JP: He can make huge mistakes. With Kate, we started figuring out that her interesting character flaw is she keeps having faith in Larry even though he always does the wrong thing because she thinks he always does it for the right reason. In any event, it really is this process where you grow.

The really hard thing to figure out in this show where you've got humans who are unusual and you've got animals whose characters aren't unusual, but they're animals—how do we write them? They can't talk to each other, so how are these worlds going to co-mingle? We figured that out for the animals, and the most interesting thing we could do was to use the animals as metaphors for humans.

scr(i)pt: *In last night's episode I just loved the character of the pig manager ... and the line about nipples! Hysterical.*

JP: "Oh, by the way, great nipples." That shows you our process. We never intended to do that joke, but the animators created this pig that was very life-like; and, because pigs have these rows of nipples, we're watching this animation, and we're like, holy cow! Well, we got a joke off it, which is great for us, you know. If we get a pick up for more orders, we're working on an episode where we address a trait inspired by Kate's character design. She's an attractive lion, but she's kind of very wide in her hips. We had always noticed that; and we've been joking about it, so we do an episode where the daughter is exercising too much. She says it's because, "You know, I have a genetic predisposition to get kind of big down there." And Kate says, "What? Your father is a little heavy, but he's, he's perfectly proportional." She says, "I'm not talking about Dad." So we've created this story where they go to this exercise group; and the women are elephants, pigs, lions, and they all want to look like Rebecca Romijn. Again, it's a metaphor for human women. The animals let us exaggerate human behavior, and that's what we didn't know going in that we were going to do. The more we did it, we realized that's the show and the money for us.

scr(i)pt: *Are you doing group meetings? Are you in a big writers' room?*

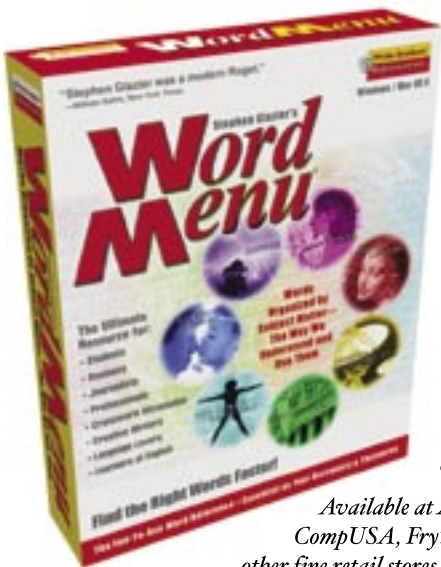
JG: We do a lot of writers' meetings. We have very strong directors. They translate well to the board artists who are sort of individual directors of the sequence—helping define what our vision is ... and we are getting better and better at that. It's all really new for us, but we had high-level writers with animation experience, so we had people who'd been around [the process] enough. And Jeffrey is obviously enormously experienced—really amazingly talented in animation filmmaking technique.

POSTSCRIPT: *We spoke with Jonathan in mid November when it became clear that the show would not be picked up for a second season, and here were his thoughts:*

JG: It's The Great Idea that wasn't quite great enough, at least in terms of getting the huge audience that we needed in order for NBC to justify the expense of the show. We've been told that if we were a live-action show with a live-action price tag, we'd have been a modest success for NBC, and very much be in the mix to return for a second season. We were very strong in the 18 to 34 part of the audience, but weak with adults over 34. At NBC, you need to have strength across the whole 18 to 49 demographic. But creatively, NBC was quite happy with the show—they saw it as distinctive and funny. NBC deserves a lot of credit for taking the big swing with this show in the first place. I do think that it's from that kind of risk-taking that their next big hit will come. Some of our best episodes are our last few which will air in December. Then there's always the DVD which will have lots of interesting extras, including the original pilot and the entire first episode of the second season, with the principal cast voicing to the story reel (edited storyboards). Siegfried and Roy decide to liven up their show by building a 100-foot robot of Jessica Simpson that will breathe fire and bellow "Total Seduction." (i)

For scheduling information go to NBC.com

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