

THE DYNAMIC KEN CUPERUS

By Mark Dillon

The versatile showrunner
stickhandles a unique
live-action/animation blend
on YTV family sitcom
The Stanley Dynamic



The Stanley Dynamic is, for the most part, a traditional family comedy. It features high school-age twins Larry (Charles Vandervaat) and Luke (Taylor Abrahamse), precocious younger sister Lori (Madison Ferguson) — all wacky — and parents Lisa (Kate Hewlett) and Lane (Michael Barbuto) — wackier still. Co-creator and showrunner Ken Cuperus calls the show an homage to *Family Ties*, a defining series of his 1980s youth. But *The Stanley Dynamic* is unique in one major way: within its live-action world, brother Luke just happens to be a cartoon character.

It's never fully explained — to paraphrase Lady Gaga, he was born this way. This much we know, as the opening-credit sequence shows mom in her hospital bed with her two new babies — one real, the other animated.

"It was my intention to never explain it, because I thought the answer wouldn't be as fun as the question," Cuperus tells *Canadian Screenwriter*. "I like when people come up with their own theories instead and say Luke's cartoonist dad created him, or he came to life. In the pilot I have Luke tell a girl how the zygote split in his mother's womb and he got all the cartoon parts."

The idea itself was born in a good news/bad news meeting with then-YTV execs Jamie Piekarz and Jocelyn Hamilton.

"I had a different show with them, and on the day it was to be greenlit they called and said 'We're really sorry, but we have to shelf it,'" Cuperus recalls. "But they said they had another concept: 'We want to do a show with a family where one of them is a cartoon. Do you think a) you could create a show like that, and b) is it even producible?' I said, 'I can certainly create it, and I think we can produce it.' So they let me have free reign to create whatever I wanted within that simple premise."

Amaze Film + Television came aboard as producers. Soon they all may have felt they'd bitten off more than they could chew. While there's a legacy of animated characters in live-action movies — from

Jerry Mouse hoofing alongside Gene Kelly in *Anchors Aweigh* (1945) to *Who Framed Roger Rabbit* (1988) — the makers felt they were on uncharted waters in a multi-cam sitcom format.

"We shoot it like a play. Throughout a three-minute scene that animated character is going to be moving around, and the actors have to remember where he is going to be," Cuperus points out. "It's incredibly challenging."

They shot a three-minute camera test with animation provider 9 Story Media Group, but in the resulting footage the character and environment didn't mesh.

"It was kind of disastrous," Cuperus says with a laugh. "We all looked at it and I was able to say, 'Here's where we went wrong and here's the easy fix.' If we hadn't done that test we may have gone out of the gate in a negative way and the show probably would not have been successful. YTV was so gracious and supportive and trusting we were going to get it right."

They tried generating Luke's movements via a performer in a motion-capture suit. They tried split screens and green screens. The system they decided on begins with a reference pass for 9 Story featuring voice actor Abrahamse performing alongside the other actors on the set. The scene is later shot with nothing in Luke's place and Abrahamse saying his lines off-camera. 9 Story adds the animated character later.

A more realistic 3-D design was rejected in favor of bringing Luke to life with Flash software.

"Because his dad is a comic-strip artist, we wanted to give him a two-dimensional paper feel," Cuperus explains. "Flash is quite rigid, so we don't have the freedom of most animated shows. It's difficult to do certain things. We can't have our character just turn around in a circle because Flash doesn't work like that. So we have to get creative."

9 Story has a couple of staffers always on set. Cuperus says that when he wants to push the boundaries of what Luke can do, the animation house

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From left: Darren Kaliciak (script coordinator), Rupinder Gill, Sara Hennessey, Ken Cuperus, Matt Kippen, Jeremy Winkles, Cole Bastedo

nearly always finds a way. And Luke does things only a cartoon character can do. For example, in the season one episode "The Stanley Spirit," Luke elongates his neck three feet to have a better look at a ghost-detecting device. Later, he's trapped in an elevator during a ghost tour, and his panicked, eyeball-popping, mouth-agape reaction is straight out of Looney Tunes.

"We pick and choose our moments," Cuperus says. "Luke is often slightly separated from the other characters. But in our pilot we have mom give a big hug to him and Larry at the same time. Those are my favorite moments: when he feels like a real kid and you forget he wasn't really there when you were shooting."

The series can afford an average eight Luke minutes per 22-minute episode. If it exceeds that in one episode, it must pull back in a later one. So while one show is heavy on Luke using some slick moves to survive a dodge-ball onslaught, he spends another in a suit of armor, his face seen only when the faceplate is raised. In still another he walks into his dad's magic trunk and is heard and not seen. Still another way to reduce Luke's screen time is to bump up the supporting cast's presence.

"These are tricks we've used to stretch the budget," Cuperus notes. "We have to work around our restrictions. It's a give-and-take."

The most recent room of writers devising these tricks also included Cuperus' "number two" Jeremy Winkles; stand-up comic Sara Hennessey; Rupinder Gill, who has also written for Comedy's *The Beaverton*; Matt Kippen, a collaborator of Cuperus' since high school; and seasoned scribe Cole Bastedo. The multi-cam process saw them putting in 8 a.m. to midnight days at Revival studios in Toronto's East End.

Ample rewrite time was built into that schedule, which sees one episode produced weekly. Monday would feature a table read with the actors followed by the room's first window to rewrite. The next day the scribes would watch the actors perform a walk-through on the lit set.

"We laugh and discover what's funny and what's not," Cuperus explains. "We then take that information back up to the writing room Tuesday night and work for another four or five hours and rewrite, and the next day we do it all over again. We do two complete run-throughs and the script gets funnier and better after each one." Thursday and Friday were blocked off for shooting. >>

Making co-viewable comedy

Children love cartoons like Bugs Bunny loves carrots. But of course not all animated fare is family-friendly. Parents who brought their kids to see *Sausage Party* were no doubt sweating like steamies during that foodstuffs orgy scene.

Producing animated series suitable for both kids and adults is a much sought-after goal. But how can you simultaneously satisfy these disparate demographics? Writers in touch with their inner child certainly help.

One such case is Radical Sheep Productions' *The Bagel and Becky Show*, co-developed by Ken Cuperus (who left to run *The Stanley Dynamic*) and showrunners Adam Rotstein and Doug Hadders. The 52 x 11 series, slated to air early in the New Year on Teletoon, tracks the adventures of Bagel the dog and his sister Becky the cat. It is adapted from a book by Dave Cooper with a change in tone.

"We stick closely to the characters. But the book is geared to four-to-six-year-olds and Teletoon was focusing on kids eight to 11, so the show was developed with that in mind," Rotstein says. He adds he and Hadders are a good fit for it because "We're emotionally stunted. Physically we're 150, but emotionally we're eight to 11. We capture the voice of that generation. We're the Lena Dunham of eight to 11."

Adds Hadders: "It's going to be fun for kids. There's lots of wacky, stupid stuff. Then there's stuff we laugh at. That's our gauge. I write what I laugh, and if people like it, I have a job."

The duo hopes for a primetime slot to reel in both kids and the after-work crowd. The show is rife with

sardonic humour yet not inappropriate for its younger core demo.

"Our humour doesn't skew that violent or gross or dark," Hadders says. "But there's some dark social behaviour that somehow creeps in." And supporting character Percy the pigeon — whom Hadders also voices—is usually the butt of it. He addresses his parents' divorce, how the kids were separated and he had no one to play with. Not usual kid cartoon fare.

So while on some shows themes skew older, elsewhere it's the references, as in *Fangbone!*, adapted by showrunners Simon Racioppa and Richard Elliott from a trilogy of graphic novels by Michael Rex about the clashes of a young barbarian who lands in a modern third-grade class.

Also produced by Radical Sheep, *Fangbone!* airs on Family Chrgd in Canada and Disney XD in the U.S. The format is 52 X 11, with each pair of episodes packaged together as a TV half-hour. Sometimes they are two-parters, and the season-one finale is a solid 22 minutes. (Producers are awaiting word on a season two pickup.) Amidst the zany comedy, there is a fantasy element for kids of all ages.

"The goal was to make it feel like a big movie adventure," Racioppa says. "All the stories have classic three-act structures. The 22-minute episodes are that but more amplified, with stories that are bigger and more detailed."

The writers amuse themselves — and, they hope, a similarly aged audience — with nostalgia.

"I've seen kids as young as three glued to the

Cuperus, 44, honed his comedy chops in his native Winnipeg, performing in sketch/improv troupe Brave New Weasels starting in high school. The 236-seat Planetarium Auditorium attached to the Manitoba Museum became the troupe's home base, and it also appeared in fringe festivals nationwide. They relocated to Toronto in 1996, but found it far more competitive and soon drifted apart. Cuperus pursued his passion for writing.

He amassed credits on animated series in the early aughts — some for kids, such as *The*

Berenstain Bears and *George Shrinks*, and some for adults, including *John Callahan's Quads!* His career snowballed from there, as he took on the showrunner role on *My Dad the Rock Star* and *Di-Gata Defenders*. From there he successfully branched out, landing staff positions on sci-fi dramas *Stargate Atlantis* and *Stargate SG-1*. His drama work also includes procedural *The Listener*.

In 2010 he joined as writer/consulting producer on *Mr. Young*, about a teen genius who becomes a teacher. His teacher on the series was creator Dan



From left: Simon Racioppa; Adam Rotstein and Doug Hadders; Tom McGillis

show, but a lot is aimed at older kids and adults," Racioppa continues. "We pepper it with references from our youth. There's lots of *Dungeons & Dragons*, *Conan* and *The Lord of the Rings*. I want to make a show kids like and that I and people like me also will sit down and enjoy. The fantasy geek demographic is where we live."

The globally popular *Total Drama* franchise has found similar success by using the template of an older-skewing genre. In this case, it was conceived as a parody of reality-show blockbuster *Survivor*. The first season, titled *Total Drama Island*, launched on Teletoon in 2007, and *Total Drama Presents: The Ridonculous Race*, the most recent incarnation, airs on Cartoon Network Canada.

Tom McGillis, president of prodco Fresh TV, says he and Jennifer Pertsch set out to create a show for tweens.

"We wrote it for an 11-year-old boy," he elaborates. "At that time, every pitch would say 'great for the whole family.' Ours didn't. We said that if the parents had

to turn to their 11-year-old and ask, 'What does that mean?', then the kid would feel smarter than their parent and we'd have won. We never tried to grab an adult audience, but we've gotten one."

And that's likely for the same reason that makes actual strategy-based reality shows so popular. Over the course of a season, up to 22 16-year-old contestant characters forge partnerships and try to overcome challenges and eliminations until one is left to collect big prize money. It is a rare serialized animated series, which McGillis says "engages viewers at a higher level and keeps them watching."

"It operates on two levels," he adds. "There's politics among characters. There are alliances and there's backstabbing. And there is always complex game-play going on. If you're a younger kid you may not be tracking it all, but if you're older, it's like watching a sports season — it gets more satisfying as things play out."

So what keeps the younger kids watching? McGillis acknowledges, "They like the fart jokes." ■

Signer, who imparted the ins and outs of running a multi-cam sitcom.

Cuperus also found his stage roots coming into play when leading the room on *The Stanley Dynamic*.

"When we talk through a story I treat every scene like an individual sketch," he elaborates. "In a multi-cam show there are many small scenes and they all have their own common engine. We don't break it like a drama, where you find your major beats. We break it scene by scene and they're their own little plays. My sketch-comedy background

prepared me for that."

The Stanley Dynamic's second 26-episode season goes to air on YTV in January, while its producers await news of a season three pickup and a U.S. sale. It already has sold throughout Europe, including Germany, where it is aired as *Mein Comic-Bruder Luke*. Cuperus is crossing his fingers for more brutally long days for him and his collaborators.

"I think all the writers would agree we've enjoyed coming to work in the morning," he says. "We laugh all day long. We just have a great time." ■