

iHuh?

'Pets' with a touch of whimsy, wonder

"The Wonder Pets," Nickelodeon's preschool cartoon about an extremely helpful guinea pig, turtle, and duck, launches its third season at 10:30 a.m. today. We spoke to the show's creator, Josh Selig, about the show's eye-catching "photo-puppetry" style and his own long career in children's TV.

JOANNA WEISS

Q. You started your TV career early, as a child actor on "Sesame Street."

A. The first two years it was broadcast, I was on the show.

Q. Did you sense what "Sesame Street" was going to become?

A. Nobody really knew what "Sesame Street" was going to become. It was a very experimental show. But for me "Sesame Street" was a very real place, even though I knew it was a TV show.

Q. Later you worked as a writer and producer on "Sesame Street." Did you always want to work in preschool TV?

A. Once I worked at "Sesame Street," I realized just how special preschoolers are — how open, how magical they are, how imaginative they are with stories and artwork. Adults by comparison have a very limited scope. . . . In many ways the average human being peaks at the age of 4.

Q. How did you develop the signature animation style of "Wonder Pets"?

A. I came to our creative director, Jennifer Oxley, with a challenge: I just sold the idea for . . . a guinea pig that goes into space and under the ocean. I want it to look like a real guinea pig but I want it to look animated. She came up with "photo puppetry": taking a photograph, breaking the pieces down, then smoothing out the transitions. It's a style

based on actual photos but has all the flexibility of animation.

Q. Does it start with someone taking a thousand photos of a guinea pig?

A. Absolutely. We went to every pet store in New York to find the perfect guinea pig. We ended up getting two that are related. We photographed both of them, cute-ified them and cleaned them up.

Q. The other thing that's striking about "Wonder Pets" is the music: Each episode is a little opera. Was that part of the original concept?

A. I didn't want the characters to speak in a traditional way. I wanted them to sing most of their dialogue. It would be a preschooler's conception of opera, this playful, whimsical way of singing.

Q. What's the state of children's television today?

A. What's good is that there are now so many outlets, so there are far more shows being commissioned from all over the world. The downside is that because certain shows have had success with consumer products, this has been the driving force for many creators as well as networks. So what began for many of us as high-quality educational content has drifted into this other realm of "What's the connection with the toys? Are there going to be vehicles?"



Josh Selig was an actor, writer, and producer on "Sesame Street," where he learned "just how special preschoolers are."