

## **Writer/Director Eric Newman Talks About Creating Pahappahoey Island**

*Interview with Angela Walker for ChristianCinema.com*

Eric Newman, a writer and director, is a storyteller who loves creating stories that move people. His screenwriting credits include the made for television film [Christmas Child](#), as well as *Punchinello and the Most Marvelous Gift*, and an on-the-road documentary series *Perfect Weight America*. Eric's most recent project is partnering with Joyce Meyer to develop new episodes of the popular children's program ***Pahappahoey Island***.

***The series Pahappahoey Island was first created 10 years ago. Have these two episodes played on television yet?***

**Eric:** No, *What About Me?* and *Do it Afraid* haven't been released yet. They're brand-new episodes. They are being sold right now at Joyce Meyer's live speaking events, and then they'll be released to market in August.

***Why was the decision made to release new episodes after 10 years, and will the other episodes be released on DVD?***

**Eric:** Actually only four episodes were produced 10 years ago. A few years after that, in 2004, TBN wanted to air a whole season of it, so we produced nine more episodes in 2004-05, for a total of 13 episodes. Two years ago we were at a lunch meeting with George Meyer and we talked about the idea. Joyce watched some of the episodes and really liked it, so we thought what if we collaborated by using some of her messages and re-introduce the series that way?

Her messages are quite simple, especially "What about me?" and "Do it afraid." They're concepts that really apply to children. After working with Joyce and our creative team, we really felt it would breathe new life into the series.

***What were some of the challenges of adapting her messages into a screenplay versus creating an original screenplay?***

**Eric:** When we started to work on these screenplays, we thought about the essence of her messages. "What about me?" is essentially about selfishness and sharing, giving and playing together. It's a message that's very easily understood by children. Our creative team sat down and tossed around questions like: What are some approaches we can take? What would that look like in our world?

Joyce was involved in the process, and we asked her how she felt about it, and if she felt her messages were well represented. What was interesting was how we introduced her character into the mix. Obviously, she's known everywhere for her voice. It's her trademark.

We experimented with different character voices that she made, and it was her idea to be a lioness. She identified a lioness as brave, and something with claws. She thought it would be fun to represent her messages and her voice through a lioness. We thought it was a great fit.

People love Joyce because she's so authentic. She is who she is. So we wanted it to sound like Joyce, and even appear like her a little bit, so we kind of characterized her personality and uniqueness in that character.

***Her voice is very distinctive and completely identifiable in the mix of voices. Did you have an existing puppet you used, or did you create a new one for her?***

**Eric:** Her character was a new design. Because authenticity is such a part of who Joyce is, telling it like it is, we didn't feel it would be authentic to represent her as something else, a puppet that stood for something

else in another episode. So we embraced her idea of the lioness and worked with really great designers. They design a lot of characters for Disney shows and others, and that was a really fun process to hone in on what that would look like. So they designed the lioness with her in mind, all the way down to some of her facial features and eyes.

When you see the character, you don't immediately think, "Oh, that's Joyce Meyer," but if you know her, you'll see similarities, I'd say.

***It's interesting how you worked her character into the story as a sort of guide for the other characters, since they have been in earlier episodes. Did you write all of the episodes, and did that make it easier to develop a part for her?***

**Eric:** I wrote the middle nine episodes then these last two. I wrote 5 – 14. What took the longest in the creative process was bringing her character into this established world we had after 13 episodes.

So we considered what it would look like for our characters to interact with her. She had said in the beginning that she didn't feel like she should be the lead, but maybe she could be somebody they go to, or occasionally go with them on their adventures. We felt like that was a good fit.

In the episode *Do it Afraid*, they meet her face to face, and that's the episode in which they finish the adventure. We wanted to make them in a way that they are two separate stories, but with the flexibility that they're one cohesive story that can be told together.

***Are there plans to involve Joyce in future episodes?***

**Eric:** We hope so. We hope that the response to these first two are good enough that it calls for us to do more. We'd love to do that because we had a blast working with Joyce.

***It's an interesting choice to use live puppets vs. animation. How do you write screenplays for puppets?***

**Eric:** We felt from the beginning that we wanted to try something in different forms. Our original creative team, including myself, was raised on *Muppets*, so we thought we wanted to do something like the *Muppets* and find some stories to tell. There are some other series that are using puppets (on PBS), like *The Book of Pooh*. We just felt drawn to the world of puppets.

It does have intense limitations when you're writing for a world of puppets. It's easy to say in a script, "Ali hands the map to Captain Hobbs." You think it's such a simple thing. But they don't have hands, really. We learned that in the first few episodes. Puppets can't hand things to each other. They can't hug each other. They really only have one working hand, so there's a lot of interesting limitations.

But I would say that working with the Disney puppeteers was amazing. They are absolutely artists, and they totally inhabit their characters. Each puppeteer we work with has their own character, and they don't change out characters. Since I'm the director, I had a front-row seat to see how they fully inhabit their characters.

Another thing we had to keep in mind was that puppets have no feet, so all the sets had to be built four or five feet off of the ground. That's also an interesting thing to accommodate in a production schedule. It's certainly challenging. There are some things you can do and some things you can't.

I couldn't imagine doing it without the level of talent in the puppeteers we had. Often I'll write a theme for the episode, for example in "What About Me?" I wanted the frog character to become a hot air balloon. So I'll write that, submit it to our team and ask, "what does this mean?" So our costume team and our puppeteer team work together to try to engineer that physically on the set. A lot of pre-production meetings go into making those things happen.

***So, in a sense, you have to bring in the cast to complete the screenplay.***

**Eric:** Absolutely. Our cast is located in Florida but our production team is in Tulsa. Our designers who design our puppets are all in Florida also. So it's a continual conversation between all of us. Our puppeteers also work as designers, so they can help with the problems we encounter (or create).

*It's an intensely collaborative process, then.*

**Eric:** Absolutely. And fortunately we've worked with the same puppeteers for the last 10 years. They're incredible people and it's truly a family atmosphere on the set. Many of our creative and production staff here at Impact have worked together since Impact started in 1982.

*It must be incredible to have a team together so long. How did you originally connect with the Disney puppeteers?*

**Eric:** A company out of Tennessee was building our puppets, and they asked if we had puppeteers yet. At the time, the producer, Tom Newman, said he thought we'd just find some voice talent and creative staff here in Tulsa. The puppet makers said, "You can't do that. Don't do that to yourself! It's much harder than you think. Imagine your arm up in the air for 11 hours a day. It's not Sunday School puppetry."

He said, "Let me give you the number of some pros." He helped us assemble a cast that, at the time, were all working on various live Disney shows at the theme parks: The Lion King, The Little Mermaid, Disney's Book of Pooh, etc. That team of people was so amazing. They were really into the project and enjoyed the message-driven focus we had, which was something they didn't really get at Disney.

It was really great for us to have them believe in what we're doing and come alongside us and go the extra mile with us. Joyce came in and got to meet some of them. That was really enjoyable for her, and they enjoyed working with her as well.

*You mentioned some of the considerations for set building and how it affected production. How long did the full production take?*

**Eric:** From a finished script to a DVD you're able to watch, I'd say five months. We shoot two to three episodes at the same time. We try to do the same day at the same time. For example, we might be visiting the main café set at different stages in three of our scripts. We'll film all of our café scenes then move onto the boat set. Then we'll move from there to a jungle set. In this case, we did two episodes at the same time.

The original creator of the series is a brilliant set designer named Jonathan Martin. He has a company based here in Tulsa that constructs all of the sets. He has a hand in all of the art direction, including the backdrops, the jungle setting, everything.

*So as you are writing episodes, are you doing so with the existing sets in mind and trying to maximize them, or do you think about adding new sets? Or do you write the story and try to figure out the sets later?*

**Eric:** I'll typically try to think of an image first that summarizes our theme. For example, in *What About Me?* the hot air balloon summarizes our theme. They're all working together. So I work backward from that. What does that mean? How do they get to that point? And keep asking questions.

In our next episode *Do It Afraid*, what was fun is that they all face their greatest fears. So it was working backward from what each of their greatest fears are. I had a lot of fun with that. Our penguin character is terrified by chickens. Our frog character is terrified of puppets. Then we worked backward from that.

Obviously, we try to use what we have, and with each episode we have more and more interesting props to use and locations where we shoot.

*Your history as a screenwriter is pretty varied. You've written commercials, and you wrote the screenplay for [Christmas Child](#). How did that happen?*

**Eric:** At Impact we have a history of doing several of Max Lucado's projects. In 1999 or 2000 we did Max Lucado's project "Tales from Wemmicksville" with Punchinello and the "You Are Special" story. Tom Newman, the producer (who is also my father), developed a friendship with Max Lucado, and when Max wrote the [Christmas Child](#) story, he said we would love to make that into a film.

In 1997, we turned his mini-book *Resurrection* into about an hour-long television film, and we wanted to take the next step with [Christmas Child](#). Max was gracious and really wanted to see that story come to life on the screen. At the time, Billy Ewing, the former head of production for Sony (executive producer of *Spiderman*, *Men in Black*, and several other really big tentpole releases there), had become friends with my dad Tom. We sent him the book and asked if he'd be interested in directing it, and he said "Absolutely."

Andrea Jobe, another writer and director of some *Pahappahoey Island* episodes, and I have a long history of working together, and we had developed an original treatment for film for [Christmas Child](#). We sent it to Bill, he really liked it and wanted to work with us on it.

Since Impact Productions first started with the traveling show "The Toymaker's Dream," a close-knit creative community of production has developed here in Tulsa. Literally, a lot of us grew up together traveling on the bus. A lot of us are in the film industry now, maybe not working for the same companies, but any chance we get to collaborate is really great. There's also a lot of trust and unspoken understanding.

It's also missional focused. "Toymaker" wasn't just about entertainment, it had a message. There's still a missional focus to everything we do, and that's why Pahappahoey was such a great fit when it came to Joyce. Joyce is missional in the way she thinks and speaks. It just worked together really well.

*What keeps you up at night, and what do you wake up thinking about in the morning?*

**Eric:** I love stories, stories that move me and inspire me to change, so I typically always have a few stories I'm working on. I don't know if they'll ever see the light of day, but that's what I'm most passionate about. That's also what I enjoy about Pahappahoey, is that we have the opportunity to tell a fun story that also has a message. That's a true love of mine.

I also love working with the team we have assembled here. It's such an incredible opportunity to work with people you love and trust. Doing something you love with people you love is an awesome opportunity.

### **About Angela Walker**

Angela Walker is Executive Editor for ChristianCinema.com, your source for faith-affirming and family-approved entertainment. She gets to know the person behind the cameras while gaining an inside look at the process of movie-making. More news and exclusive interviews with today's top filmmakers and Christians in Cinema can be found at <http://www.christiancinema.com/catalog/newsdesk.php>.

### **About ChristianCinema.com**

ChristianCinema.com is the largest online source for faith-affirming and family-approved films to buy or rent. With more than 6000 reviews of theatrical and direct-to-DVD films from multiple sources, families can decide what films to watch and what films to buy. In a unique effort to connect the audience with the filmmakers, they also provide exclusive interviews with producers, directors, writers and actors from today's top films.