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REVIEW: TV Critic Reviews... "Higglytown Heroes"

By Kristin Johnson

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As aunt of a preschooler and an aspiring voiceover actress (I knew all those hours of watching Bugs Bunny would come in handy), I know all the kids' shows as well as every kids' DVD out there. My TV Critic column will be a regular family-fare guide to Kids' TV.

In my opinion, there's no better way celebrities can recoup their outrageous salaries than entertaining and sometimes educating kids. And They Might Be Giants get the "cooler than Elvis" vote for singing the theme song to one of Playhouse Disney's newest hits, "Higglytown Heroes."

For those of you not familiar with all things Higgly (an adjective used as much as "Smurfy" but not, thank Higgles, as a verb), the series centers on a small town and four tots named Eubie, Kip, and siblings Wayne and Twinkle. Think "South Park" with better art and no foul mouths. The strongest language is, "Aw, pickles," usually uttered by Twinkle (pinker than Trista Rehn Sutter!) after her fanciful ideas for solving the kids' dilemmas get gently punctured by Fran, a friendly squirrel voiced by Edie McClurg.

In each two-episode half-hour show, the Higgly Kids experience common, innocent childhood events such as finding a caterpillar, hosting a television party for the Happy Hairy Higgly Monster Primetime Special, losing a tooth, Kip's Grandpa locked in the bathroom, or caring for an unhappy bird. The kids try to solve their problems, guided by Fran who is the voice of reason, helped by their loving families and the ever-enthusiastic oddly Bill and Ted-ish Pizza Guy...plus someone special. Then comes the inevitable song...

"Someone special, who could it be?

This job's too big for you and me.

We need some help!

But never fear-o,

It looks like a job for a...Higglytown Hero!

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A Higglytown Hero!"

Some of the heroes are natural choices, especially after September 11: Police Woman, Firefighter, etc. But how many of us think of sanitation workers, electricians, plumbers, gardeners, mail carriers (voiced by Kathie Lee Gifford) and farmers as heroes? Or a telephone operator (voiced by Cyndi Lauper)? Although the heroes have celebrity voices, the Higgly Kids discover that the real stars all around them are the people who solve problems every day.

Some of the dilemmas get a little ridiculous from an adult perspective. For example, when Kip climbs a tree to save a beloved neighborhood cat and her kittens, his friends help him. Why, when he gets stuck, can't they help him back down? Ahem...when was the last time you tripped and panicked? You need help in your own life every day without thinking about it.

The beauty of "Higglytown Heroes" is that it celebrates working together, "having fun together," and the

Higgly Kids as well as their families never take for granted the Heroes in their lives. The Electrician (Lance Bass) gets invited to share in the "Higgly Monsters" TV party after repairing the circuitry for Kip's house. The Fire Fighter (Donald Faison) who gets Kip out of the tree shares in a birthday party for the neighborhood cat. How many of us go out of our way to thank the people who make our lives easier? Sometimes we forget to see them as people with needs and feelings.

We even forget to see our own families as heroes. Kip's Grandmama (voice of Betty White) knits the kids sweaters. Kip's Mom acts like the soul of '50s domesticity, but gets rewarded when Kip and his friends make her a get-well card. Wayne's Mom shows the kids a caterpillar and drives them to the beach.

Interestingly, Higgly families aren't always nuclear families, something Disney portrays as normal without calling attention to it. Kip's family is the closest, with twin sisters, a baby sister, a mom and dad (who operates a hot dog cart), and two grandparents who either live in Kip's large house or visit constantly. Twinkle and Wayne's mom seems to be a single parent (although all are African-American, no one has screamed racism yet), and Eubie is apparently being raised by his Southern-accented Aunt Millie and Uncle Zooter, with visits from his Southern-accented Grandpop (a farmer).

In many ways, Higglytown is idealized. No one really seems to worry about jobs, money or status. People go to the library, and a Librarian is a Higglytown Hero! The kids "work real hard" and take responsibility (gasp) by thinking up ways to help themselves and their families, and in each episode there are little moral lessons and advice (take care of your pets, don't use too much electricity, make someone smile) to show the kids how they can grow up to be...Higglytown Heroes!

Cynics and naysayers will deride this as kiddie pablum. I call it a refreshing dose of reality and a tribute to the heroes all around us. The Disney animators are Higglytown Heroes for creating this show.

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Kristin Johnson is co-author of the "highly recommended" Midwest Book Review pick, *Christmas Cookies Are For Giving: Stories, Recipes and Tips for Making Heartwarming Gifts* (ISBN: 0-9723473-9-9). A downloadable media kit is available at our Web site,

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Everyone's a Critic or At Least They Could Be

By Heather Wallace

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Imagine a job that is tons of fun and, if you follow the advice outlined below, is probably one of the easier routes to becoming a household name. It is the job of Movie Reviewer. Just think about how wonderful it would be to get paid to munch on popcorn and watch films.

This is one job that every single one of us has been training for our entire lives. Your willingness to tell anyone who will listen that a particular movie was overrated or that a certain movie star's last performance was Oscar-worthy already makes you a movie critic. The only difference between you and the pros is that they get paid for their opinions and their names are known the world over.

Becoming a movie critic is easily accessible to everyone. All you need is a love of the cinema, the ability to write and share your opinions, and the drive to parley your reviews into fame and fortune.

Stop The Presses

The fact of the matter is that the majority of newspapers aren't going to give you the time of day without some previous experience. That is where the Internet comes in. Your first step to becoming a critic is creating a web destination. Set-up a web site and post reviews to it on a regular basis. By doing this you will be able to hone your skills, discipline yourself to write regularly, and another added bonus is that you will gain a following of loyal readers. This is a must if you want to become a famous critic.

Spread the Word

To really get your name out there you absolutely must syndicate your reviews. You can get your reviews on other web sites in a number of ways, but the two best and easiest are to:

1. Sign-up as a content provider at freesticky.com and sites similar in nature.

2. Join and submit reviews to the following sites:

<http://www.rottentomatoes.com>

<http://www.movie-gurus.com/content/join/>

<http://www.movietome.com/about/writer.shtml>

Ya Gotta Have a Gimmick

If you plan on writing reviews it would be a good idea to come up with a gimmick. A straight forward review just isn't going to garner you much attention or be that memorable. A review with a twist, on the other hand, will keep people coming back to read what you have to say and it will cement your name in the minds of the masses.

Whenever you hear "Two Thumbs Up" who do you immediately think of? That is a perfect example of a gimmick.

Who are the worst dressed celebrities? Just ask Mr. Blackwell. He may not be a movie critic, but he does us a gimmick to make himself memorable. His variety of gimmick is known as "throwing a brick". No, not literally, but saying something negative about a celebrity will certainly garner attention. Joan Rivers is another person who uses this type of gimmick to gain attention for herself. After all, who could forget her scathing remarks on the red carpet?

The rating system at Rotten Tomatoes that was created for their compendium of reviews is another fine example of a gimmick.

You should avoid closely copying the gimmick of another well-known critic as you will merely be viewed as a pale imitation. Although, if you can come up with an inventive and original twist on one of their gimmicks, then by all means give it a shot.

Show Me The Money

In the beginning your main goal should be to make your name well-known and synonymous with movie reviews. Once you have achieved a modicum of fame then you can parley that into a paycheck. There are a of couple ways that you can turn the experience and celebrity that you have achieve online into cash and recognition offline.

1. Contact newspapers in your area. Find the email address for these newspapers and write to them asking if they would be interested in having you write reviews for their publication. Be sure to write to the appropriate editor. In most cases this will be the entertainment editor.

When writing for a newspaper it is vital that you don't sign a work-for-hire contract. If you were to do this then the publication would own the copyright to all of your work, which means that you would not be able to publish your reviews on your web site or anywhere else as the newspaper is now the copyright holder.

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2. Another offline venue that you should explore is radio. Public radio is probably your best bet, but you should approach mainstream radio stations as well. You could suggest doing reviews on the morning show of a Top 40 station or, perhaps, bite-size reviews that could be played all through-out the day.

Heather Wallace is a writer whose work has been published in national, regional, and online publications. Additionally, she has written articles as a newspaper correspondent. Visit <http://www.fetchingsites.com/MovieReviewer.html> for more information on becoming the next Roger Ebert or Leonard Maltin.

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