GIRL POWER

If Phineas and Ferb resonates particularly well with boys, H2O: Just Add Water is all about empowering young girls, a life mission for the show’s creator, Jonathan Shiff. He felt his young daughter didn’t have any good programs to watch on TV and was determined to do something about it, although it took some work to reach his goal.

“I always had a passion for storytelling and that’s probably why I became a lawyer—lawyers are pretty good at telling stories,” quips Shiff. “You get paid to tell stories in the law profession; you don’t always get paid to do it in media. My wife and I had a daughter 23 years ago and found there was very little for her to watch and I thought, This is weird. So I took a few months off to take a film course.”

He then was hired by Crawford Productions, which in the early ’80s was a powerhouse in Australian television. “I was a lawyer for them on the understanding that they would train me as a producer,” explains Shiff. “And that was a very good training ground, I learned every aspect of production and got a 360-degree skill set that proved very useful when I became an independent.”

When he set up his own company, Jonathan M. Shiff Productions, he could finally satisfy his desire to produce suitable shows for his little girl. “At the time, it seemed to me that people were into the ephemeral—telling stories based on very thin premises without actually drilling deeper into classic structures. And so the big breakout show for us was Ocean Girl in the ’90s, which went to the Disney Channel in the U.S.”

Ocean Girl also led to some extremely fruitful partnerships for Shiff, the first with Télé Images in France. “They were very
much my mentors, distributors and sales agents. And they encouraged and backed me in each of these projects, including Ocean Girl,” says Shiff. “In the last ten years it’s been ZDF Enterprises in Germany. ZDF and I enjoy an incredibly successful friendship and strategic partnership. There are a few types of partnerships that you do in this business. There are those that are project driven. And there are those that are relationship driven. And you’ve got to find yourself the latter because the former will last as long as the show, or the dailies! And that was never of interest to me. I always took a very strategic long-term vision that you do. You know what? I didn’t give up being a lawyer so that I can’t pay my mortgage. I need to have output deals in place. I need to have a long-term strategic partnership to mutual benefit. I structured my business in the classic mold I had been trained in many years earlier at Crawford.”

**POSITIVE IMAGES**

It was Shiff’s partnership with ZDF that led to his latest hit, H2O: Just Add Water. “The head of the children’s and youth-programming division at ZDF is Nicole Keerb and she has been collaborating with me and preening my stories for nearly ten years now,” he explains. “Nicole said to me, You should do something underwater. Kids loved Ocean Girl, the underwater realm is just a mystery to kids.”

“I really liked the idea of teenagers who have superpowers,” Shiff continues. “In a lot of my shows there are empowered girls. That’s because I’m the father of a 25-year-old who just graduated from university. Young women constantly need empowering, strong role models, now more than ever, with the body image messages they get assailed with. Girls still live in a world where they are not on a level playing field with boys, and they need to be constantly given proactive reminders that they can do anything they want to do.”

Shiff wanted to take his affection for empowered young women in lead roles and create a new show, but this time a bit edgier and darker, and mermaids fit the bill. He decided the three lead characters should be real teenagers, who develop superpowers when water touches them.

H2O has been Shiff’s biggest success. ZDF has sold the series to some 120 territories and as do all of Shiff’s shows, H2O has a glossy look to it. “I really like pushing the envelope a little bit on the production values,” he explains. “When you’ve got 22 people doing a two-camera film shoot underwater on a girl in a mermaid costume with stuntmen and stuntwomen and dive masters and dolphins, or you are in a tank where a building crane is tipping a boat so it looks like it’s capsizing underwater, you have to pinch yourself that you are making children’s television and not a movie.”

“I’ve tried to take movie production values and a movie mentality to 22 minutes of kids’ drama because, let’s face it, kids are watching Harry Potter,” he continues. “Whether I like it or not, it’s Harry Potter one day and Jonathan Shiff the next. Our brand has to climb that mountain, otherwise it’s not going to get seen.”

Shiff’s new show at MIPCOM will be The Elephant Princess. “It’s supposedly normal teenage girl who turns 16, and a guy knocks on her back door during her birthday party and says, ‘I’m here to take you back. You’re the princess of a magic kingdom.’ Behind him is standing an elephant. He says, ‘This is the royal elephant, it’s yours, I’ll leave it with you.’ That’s a good teenage dilemma for a 16-year-old at her birthday party.”

“Girls... need to be constantly given proactive reminders that they can do anything they want to do.”
—Jonathan Shiff

[During the series she discovers] flying carpets and magic kingdoms, and yet she is conflicted by the fact that she is a singer/songwriter for her own band and she’d rather be with the garage band than a princess in the kingdom.”

All of Shiff’s shows have an element of fantasy to them. “Fantasy lifts you into a higher concept plane and you have to reach for the stars a little bit,” he says. “You’ve got to dream a little bit to go to where you want to be next and you can’t tell kids that enough. Particularly when kids today more than ever are inculcated with so much media and so much imagery that is negative.”

**A WAY WITH WORDS**

Using media in a positive way was what motivated Dorothea Gillim to leave teaching, because she wanted to have an even greater impact on children.

Television and movies are replete with superheroes, but none of them are anything like Becky Botsford, a mild-mannered 10-year-old that answers the call of duty, transforms into WordGirl, and fights crime with her voluminous vocabulary. She looks like an ordinary fifth grader but is actually an alien from the planet Lexicon. She battles a wacky group of villains, from Dr. Two-Brains to The Butcher, assisted by her faithful monkey sidekick, Captain Huggy Face.

WordGirl springs from Gillim’s love for eloquent speech. “The origins of the show are back when I was in ninth grade and asked my parents for a dictionary for Christmas,” recalls Gillim. “But it