



Rick Wiener Uncovered

An interview by Jake Friedman

If you haven't caught Seth MacFarlane's new show, "American Dad," you should check it out. Like "Family Guy" was six years ago, this show is in the baby stages of what could be a runaway hit. Rick Wiener had started out as a writer on such shows as "Mad About You" and "Two Guys a Girl and a Pizza Place" before joining the "American Dad" team as co-executive producer and writer. Here he shares his two cents.

JF: What do a co-executive producer and writer do?

RW: A co-executive producer is mostly in charge of writing stuff -- breaking stories and doing re-writes and what have you. The executive producer often times has to deal with casting, editing, network calls and a thousand other things. Mike Barker and Matt Weitzman are the guys who created the show, with Seth MacFarlane. And when they're not there, they need someone keeping the writing process moving forward. ... When you break a story it means that you propose a story, the beginning, middle and end, and all the scenes. And that's really time consuming, so they rely on their co-executive producers to break stories, then they come in and review them. And then after the story is broken, it's written by a particular writer, and consequently after that everyone reads it and does notes on it and we re-write it together as a staff.

JF: How does writing for an animated show differ from a live-action show?

RW: It's harder to find a story that works, it's much more intricate and faster. Here you can do whatever you want, so the trick is not getting carried away with that, and making sure that the stories fall back on the characters and are really grounded in who the characters are. ... In a regular television show you write the script, and then you have a table read, and then you do some run-throughs, and by Friday you've shot the show. Here, you have a table read; and then you need a storyboard of how the characters will portray those words that you've written; and then another four months later we do something called the animatic, which shoots the storyboards with the camera and you hear the voices on top of it; then you do a re-write on that and then another five or six months after that it comes back to us from Korea. It's really such a long process.

JF: How'd you get hooked up with this animated show?

RW: Through an agent. My agent represents the guys who created it, so we came in for a meeting and they liked what we had to say, ... that our approach to an animated show would be to have all the fun of animation but still keep the characters emotionally grounded in the stories. We're from shows like "Mad About You" and "Two Guys A Girl and a Pizza Place" - real relationship shows - so we said that's what we would bring to the party, stories that are both funny but emotionally grounded, too. Barker and Weitzman seemed to respond to that, that was their vision as well, so everyone got together.

JF: So where does Seth MacFarlane fit in?



RW: Seth had the idea for the show, and they were both writers for Family Guy, and he asked them to join him, if they were interested in creating a show with him. So they did.

JF: What's the relationship like between the American Dad people and the Family Guy people?

RW: We're really quite separated. They're in another wing of the building, so once in a while we see each other in the kitchen, but we really don't have that much interaction with them.

JF: Did you open up Mad Magazine recently?

RW: [chuckling] Yeah, I saw that.

(It depicts an "American Dad" writer scrounging in the dumpster behind the "Family Guy" staff)

JF: Any comment?

RW: Yeah, we have a totally different way of telling stories, so it's fine. It's funny, we get it, but there was no real emotional impact on us from that. It's a similar show in many ways, and it's different in many ways.

JF: What's Seth like in person?

RW: He is an easy-going guy, and a funny guy. He's so incredibly busy, we only see him mostly at the table readings and he's just great, doing multiple voices. He'll have conversations with himself between the different characters [Stan and Roger], it's hilarious. He is truly truly funny.

JF: What's the hardest part about your job?

RW: It's fun, but getting a story that makes sense and gets [the audience] involved emotionally, and also making sure that the actions the characters are taking makes sense. You could have the greatest jokes in the world, but if the script is really not making sense, the jokes for some reason aren't funny.

JF: What's the biggest perk?

RW: Free lunch. One of the perks of Hollywood is there's always free lunch, and when you first get here and you realize it, you usually end up getting fat. Like when you first came to college and you ate pizza every night, it's sort of the same learning curve.

JF: What does it take to be a writer on a show like American Dad?

RW: It takes good storytelling ability and comedy. ... The most common two ways into the TV-writing business are you either start how I did - I got a job as a production assistant, getting people lunch and then I got to know people; and then I got a job as a writing assistant, and then I got a job as a writer and then worked my way up from there. And then there are those who write a spec script, they write a script for a show that they know and like; and they get an agent with that script; and that script is sent around to different writers at the beginning of the season; and when they are staffing the writing staff and need a lower level writer, and they like your script, they interview you and then they hire you.

JF: These spec scripts are for shows other than the ones applied for?

RW: Usually. People who are working on the exact show know the show so well and the history so well that often times they're also critical of what someone writes, their [characters'] voices and stuff like that. It's just so hard to break that shell.

JF: Why did you choose sitcom writing?

RW: It seemed like a fun job.

JF: Is it a fun job?

RW: It's totally a fun job.