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Avant-gardener

"VeggieTales" creator Phil Vischer cultivates morals with Bible-based videos

By Dave Domingo

"My name's Bob. I'm a tomato, and I'm here to help you."

That's how Phil Vischer's cartoon alter ego introduces himself to a bewildered Junior Asparagus in an early episode of "VeggieTales."

The small series — so far eight episodes have been produced — has a mostly Christian 'cult following' that's nuts about the half-hour videos, just as some fans still are nuts about Monty Python fare.

But in VeggieTales, the players are computer-animated fruits and vegetables, and they teach Judeo-Christian messages with their wacky stories and songs.

"I've always had the heart of a storyteller," Vischer says by phone from his studio in Chicago. "So I was always looking for ways to use the technology to create characters that kids could have a relationship with, that you become attached to emotionally."

The series' latest offering, "The VeggieTales Christmas Spectacular," airs at 8 p.m. Saturday on Pax TV.

Vischer wears many hats as head of the "VeggieTales" company, Big Idea productions. He's an animator, a writer, a composer and — maybe most important to young viewers — an actor.

He provides voices for several characters, including Bob the Tomato, who acts as straight man to a goofy Cucumber named Larry.

College friend and series co-creator Mike Nawrocki is the voice of Larry, and Vischer's wife, Lisa, plays Junior, a young asparagus through whose exploits children learn most of the series' moral lessons.

Why use vegetables?

Vischer says simplicity was the key to computer animation back in 1990, when the characters were created. "Even then, a Scrubbing Bubbles commercial was about half a million dollars for 30 seconds," he says, "and we wanted to do 30 minutes, not 30 seconds."

Vischer's experiments with animation software yielded strange criteria: "The characters couldn't have arms, legs, hair or clothes — the four things that were really tripping up technology at that point," he says. "And we knew we were going to sell in Christian bookstores, so the clothes thing could get us in trouble.

"So we had to come up with characters that would work limbless, hairless and naked."

Vischer writes the dialogue for all the episodes, plus most of the teaching songs — as differentiated from the "Silly Songs With Larry," which are usually penned by Nawrocki and are "pretty much out of the blue," Vischer says.

"We've actually had people read deep theological implications into our silly songs, and we just have to say 'Duh, uh, nope. That's great that you found that, but — "

In the planning phase of each episode, Vischer, his wife and his mom — who has a doctorate in education — collaborate to identify the 'value' and the 'nugget of truth' that are to be taught.

Unlike the makers of “The Prince of Egypt,” the Big Idea planners don’t consult with 700 theologians to decide how to present Bible stories and themes respectfully.

“This is our technique: First you go through the story and decide what elements are sacred,” Vischer says. “So they’re the major themes, the major plot points, the major characters. ... We will say ‘These are sacred; we won’t touch those. Our story HAS to communicate the truths’ — we can’t radically rewrite.

“Once we’ve identified what is sacred,” Vischer says, “then we decide that nothing else is.”

For example, in a discussion about Joshua and the battle of Jericho, the question arose of what the people of Jericho did while the Israelites were marching around the city.

“So I thought, ‘Oh, I know! They’re making fun of them, and they’re dropping slushies on their heads,’” Vischer says. “Now that’s interesting!

“And it doesn’t say in the Bible that they DIDN’T drop slushies on their heads.”

At the end of each episode, Bob and Larry differentiate between the biblical elements of the story and the fanciful ones, Vischer says.

“We don’t want kids to come away thinking Bible stories are the same as Aesop’s fables and you can just twist them as much as you want because they’re not real. Because there’s history in there.”

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Christmas show teaches meaning of the holiday

“The VeggieTales Christmas Spectacular,” the first network broadcast of the Christian vegetable cartoon, combines something old and something new.

Veggies gather to watch an elaborate production staged by other veggies. There’s music — some very reverent and some with the series’ unique brand of gratuitous silliness. But it’s all a prelude to the main event: a screening of “The Toy That Saved Christmas.”

The story within the story involves a Buzz Saw Louie doll who escapes the factory and helps teach an asparagus, a carrot and other young veggies a moral lesson about the Lord’s birthday.

“The nugget of truth in the Christmas special is that Christmas isn’t about getting — it’s about giving,” says creator Phil Vischer. “We felt that was kind of vital.”

The show’s concept is a nod to the Radio City productions that preceded films in earlier times — and to the grandiose “Radio City Christmas Spectacular,” which is enjoying annual runs in seven cities.

“There’s a huge set, and it’s just a huge production,” Vischer says. It’s an amazing thing. There are new songs; there’s — I can’t say any more.”