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ANNALS OF ANIMATION

YOU DUMB BABIES!

How raising the "Rugrats" children became as difficult as the real thing.

BY MIMI SWARTZ

OVER the past decade, Arlene Klasky and her former husband, Gabor Csupo, have become two of the most highly regarded animators in Hollywood. In the late eighties, they helped create "The Simp-

cious than their parents could ever imagine (they talk and conspire as soon as the grownups leave the room) but nevertheless often find themselves at the mercy of Tommy's malevolent three-year-old cousin Angelica, the un-



Angelica Pickles: A rotten little girl and a role model for millions.

sons," a prime-time cartoon show based on Matt Groening's dark, deadpan comics about a modern family, and they went on to originate several successful cartoon series. Nine years ago, with the producer Paul Germain, they developed "Rugrats," which is now the most popular children's television cartoon show in the country. (It has won three Daytime Emmy Awards, and "The Rugrats Movie," a feature film based on the show, just opened.) "Rugrats" stars a group of preternaturally adventurous toddlers: Tommy Pickles, a sweet-natured one-year-old; Chuckie, his two-year-old neurotic friend; and the year-old twins from next door, Phil and Lil. The children are far more pre-

reliable emissary between the world of the children and that of adults.

Klasky, however, did not seem completely sanguine about "Rugrats" when I visited her a few months ago in her austere office at Klasky Csupo, Inc., the animation studio she runs with Csupo. Her wide eyes, generous mouth, and abundant curly hair give her the pleasant, reassuring look of an earth mother, but her manner was guarded and anxious as we spoke. When I asked her about Angelica, she shrank back in her swivel chair. "I think she's a bully," she said. "I never liked Angelica."

This confession is somewhat surprising, since Angelica is one of children's favorite "Rugrats" characters. It

ISTVAN BANYAI

is also largely through her that Klasky Csupo established the edgier, more sophisticated children's-cartoon style that is the studio's trademark. For millions of kids, Angelica is their icon of mischief—a direct descendant of Spanky McFarland, Dennis the Menace, and Eloise. Angelica was invited to promote the movie on “The Rosie O'Donnell Show,” and she was given a speaking role in a Ford Motor Company commercial. This month, she was honored by Girls, Inc., a nonprofit educational group formed to inspire young women to be “strong, smart and bold,” and her spinoff videos, “Angelica the Divine” and “Angelica Knows Best,” are strong sellers. Producers of children's programming regard her as completely bankable—the cartoon equivalent of Julia Roberts. They've been known to exhort writers and animators, “Get me more characters like Angelica!”

But Angelica was a source of dissonance at Klasky Csupo. Although the idea of a baby show originated with Klasky, Angelica was not her invention, and Klasky never fully approved of the way Germain and the show's first team of writers developed her character. In the early years of the series, Angelica sued her parents, ran away from home in her baby convertible, framed her friends for crimes that she had committed, and terrorized innocents. (In one episode, she convinced Chuckie that his stomach was going to explode because he had eaten a watermelon seed.) Her trademark line became “You dumb babies!,” and her only real friend was a ratty doll named Cynthia. “She's really nasty to Tommy, Chuckie, and the twins,” notes U. C. Knoepfelmacher, an authority on children's literature who teaches at Princeton University. “But, on the other hand, her manipulation of her businesswoman mother and her resourcefulness are tremendously attractive.”

In a sense, Angelica embodied the approach to children's television pioneered in the late eighties by Geraldine Laybourne, then the president of Nickelodeon (she now has her own multimedia company). Laybourne wanted shows that were smarter and funnier than the standard children's programs, without being offensive or inappropriate for grade-schoolers. So the network recruited writers and animators with

a sharper sensibility, and then struggled to contain their darker impulses. It was a risky strategy, and it produced some anxious moments—notably, in the “Ren & Stimpy Show,” a manic cartoon series in the Ralph Steadman style about a cat and a chihuahua. Its creator, John Kricfalusi, was an irascible eccentric who was eventually removed from the series because his material was deemed too violent and scatological. With “Rugrats,” discord among the staff arose from the show's effort to be both cutting-edge and age-appropriate, and the angriest battles were fought over Angelica. In fact, the conflict over Angelica was in many ways responsible for the breakup of the original “Rugrats” creative team.

I FIRST became aware of Angelica the way most parents do—when I was wandering in and out of the room while my son, then five years old, was watching television. “Rugrats” wasn't like the shows I had watched as a kid. In the world inhabited by the Pickles family and their friends, the children were precocious, and the dialogue was knowing, with sly references to everything from “Our Gang” to Sigmund Freud and sci-fi movies like “Fantastic Voyage.” The parents were ambitious, self-absorbed, and addicted to experts and gadgets. The babies had an addled, homely look that made them hipper than their smooth, glossy counterparts on other kids' shows. Tommy was good-hearted and brave, but he looked as though he'd been hit over the head with a blunt instrument. Angelica had tight yellow pigtails, saucer eyes, and a pointy little nose, and she spoke out of one side of her face, in a high, wrenching whine that evoked angry kittens. Chuckie, with his Swifty Lazar glasses and convulsed red hair, was a walking nervous breakdown.

The show projected a jaded view of family life and consumer culture. Aside from a somewhat dyspeptic Grandpa Lou, there was no wise Robert Young figure to offer protection and guidance. In one episode, Tommy's father, the scruffy, hapless inventor Stu Pickles, and his dithering but well-intentioned wife, Didi, took Tommy to a child psychologist. Stu had vehemently resisted seeking help, but once they arrived he talked compulsively to the doctor about





"Excellent—let's run it through legal."

his own psychologically deprived childhood, unaware that Tommy had crawled away to make trouble elsewhere in the high-rise office building. Another show introduced Angelica's parents—Drew, an investment banker, and Charlotte, an executive with Mergecorp who was always pictured in a suit and screaming into the cell phone at her assistant, Jonathan. "Charlotte, something's wrong with the fax machine!" Drew yelled in one scene. "Use the one in the bedroom!" she called from another part of the house.

Particularly in the show's first season, Angelica was mischief unchained, a child as shrewd as she was narcissistic. She was prone to malapropisms and liked to pontificate about the wider world. ("When you're rich, you can pay someone else to be scared for you.") At the end of each episode, Angelica received her obligatory comeuppance, yet she remained unrepentant from show to show. Her nastiness was funny, and, for Klasky at least, that was often a problem.

"Arlene didn't like Angelica," Germain told me. "She never did." When I visited him in his office, at Disney's studios, earlier this fall and asked about the show, he sounded like a man who had lost his kids in a custody battle, and in Hollywood terms he had. Germain

is tall, pale, and rather intense, and has a passion for precision. In 1992, when the executives at Nickelodeon suggested a "Rugrats" Hanukkah special, Germain felt compelled to argue that a Passover special was a funny idea, but that a Hanukkah special was not. ("They wanted the Jewish version of a Christmas episode. I told them, 'You know, that's not an interesting story.'")

Germain is a native of Southern California, and studied economics at Berkeley in the late seventies. Before he was thirty, he was in charge of development for James L. Brooks, who created "The Mary Tyler Moore Show." In the late eighties, Brooks produced the "Tracey Ullman Show," and he hit on the idea of interspersing Ullman's skits with cartoons. Brooks admired the work of the Portland cartoonist Matt Groening, whose strip "Life in Hell" was just taking off with the grunge set, and he asked Germain to find a way to animate it. Germain turned to Klasky and Csupo, who were then still relatively unknown. Klasky had been trained as a graphic designer, and Csupo was a Hungarian émigré whose sensibility had been shaped by everything from Disney's fairy-tale classics to Bergman's films and Frank Zappa's music. Ger-

main took a chance on them: "The Simpsons" became an instant hit. Soon afterward, in 1989, Germain left Brooks to work as a development executive for Klasky Csupo. "We wanted to do intelligent stories for intelligent children," he told me. "I had worked with Jim Brooks, who wasn't gonna do crap, and I wasn't gonna do crap."

Later that year, Nickelodeon asked Klasky Csupo to pitch some ideas for shows. The night before the scheduled meeting with Nickelodeon, Klasky, who was on maternity leave, called Germain with one last suggestion. "What about a show about babies?" she asked. Germain was dubious, but then, he says, he went to bed thinking of a way to make it work. "Finally, it came to me," he recalls. "My pitch would be a show about little babies, but the minute adults leave the room the babies cognate and can talk."

The next day, Germain and Csupo met with Vanessa Coffey, who was then creating an animation department for Nickelodeon. They proposed a show about a boy trying to escape his barren life at a gas station on another planet. Then they suggested one (prescient in retrospect) about life inside a bug city. Coffey wasn't buying. Finally, Germain pitched the idea for a series about babies' lives from the baby's point of view. "Great," Coffey said. "Let's do that one."

Germain, Klasky, and Csupo set out to create the squiggly and near-dissipated characters of Tommy Pickles; his dog, Spike; his parents, Stu and Didi; his Grandpa Lou; and the twins Phil and Lil. Their pilot, "Tommy Pickles and the Great White Thing," played to the insatiable appetite of children for toilet humor and touched on themes that would become "Rugrats" trademarks: exceptionally savvy kids (after his parents tuck him in for the night, Tommy grabs a hidden screwdriver to escape from his crib); oblivious parents (Stu is too busy with a high-powered dinner party to notice that Tommy is on the loose); and knowing references to popular culture (after laying waste the bathroom, Charlie Chaplin-style, Tommy plops down in front of the television and changes the channel from a mind-

less commercial to a head-banger music video). Nickelodeon loved the pilot, and so did a majority of the kids in the test audience. The network ordered thirteen episodes.

To sustain the series, however, the creators needed more characters. Chuckie was added, as Tommy's cautious sidekick, but, according to Germain, "we decided we needed a bully, because to me childhood is about dealing with bullies." As a kid, Germain had been ruthlessly tormented by a girl. It was decided that the bully should be a spoiled little girl with self-absorbed parents. Her name would be Angelica.

THE special appeal of animation is that there is no limit on mischief. If you can imagine it, you can do it—drop someone off a cliff, mash him into a pancake, twist his arm like a corkscrew. Legendary animators, such as Chuck Jones, at Warner Bros., were masters of such mayhem, which the studios eventually began referring to as "squash and stretch." The fast action was expensive, but that was of little concern during the Depression, when labor was cheap. No one was particularly concerned about content, either, because cartoon characters like Bugs Bunny, Daffy Duck, and Sylvester and Tweety were not regarded solely as children's fare. Cartoons ran as previews to movies, and were made to work on several levels.

It wasn't until the institutionalization of Saturday-morning children's television, in the nineteen-sixties, that studios came under pressure to tone down gratuitous violence and "imitable" behavior in cartoons. Kevin S. Sandler, the editor of the lively book "Reading the Rabbit: Explorations in Warner Bros. Animation," explains how, in the nineteen-seventies, television censors persuaded Warner Bros. to cut cartoon scenes in which characters shot guns, drank gasoline or alcohol, made cowboy-and-Indian or other racial jokes, or received electric shocks. The number of times a character could be pounded into the ground had to be reduced from, say, six to two.

The studios were willing to limit the squash and stretch in part because animation had become very costly. Even though much of the production began to be sent overseas, cartoons were so ex-

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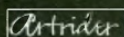
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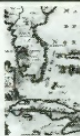
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pensive by the nineteen-eighties that animators often had to make a deal with a toymaker before they could create a show. As a result, Saturday morning became a wasteland of gender-segregated tie-in programs, like the refurbished "G.I. Joe" for boys and "My Little Pony and Friends" for girls. There was no incentive to make any changes until 1990, when the F.C.C. required that networks be held accountable for the quality of children's programming or risk losing their licenses.

Meanwhile, animation for adults had become racier. Ralph Bakshi came up with a surprise hit in "Fritz the Cat," in 1972, and sixteen years later Roger Zemeckis directed the sexy, successful "Who Framed Roger Rabbit?" In late 1989, "The Simpsons" combined animation and adult humor during prime time, and was followed by the far more cynical "Beavis and Butt-head," in 1993. These shows proved that grownups were perfectly willing to watch cartoons as long as the scripts were knowing. They also demonstrated that children would watch far more complex material than they had been getting on Saturday mornings.

Nickelodeon's goal, in the late eighties, was to find a fresh way of entertaining six- to eleven-year-olds without patronizing or corrupting them. "We wanted to change the face of animation," Vanessa Coffey, who now develops children's programming for King World Productions, says. The company's buzzword was "sophisticated." "When I was growing up, 'Bugs Bunny' was for kids and 'Donna Reed' was for adults," Mitchell Kriegman, a former "Rugrats" story editor for Nickelodeon, says. "Which one was the more sophisticated? 'Bugs Bunny' had classical references; 'Donna Reed' was for morons."

But Nickelodeon knew it had to police content. The network took pains to avoid scenes that could be construed as dangerous to children. "Could we have the babies going down the staircase on a vacuum cleaner? No," Coffey says. "Could we have babies going out the window? No." Nickelodeon also addressed the issue of children's self-esteem—it didn't like characters calling each other "dumb" or "stupid"—

and, appropriately for a company run predominantly by women, the issue of gender roles. Some "Rugrats" writers felt they were spending so much time creating confident and employed female characters that the men, devoid of advocates, began to look wimpy and ineffectual.

The aim, explains Craig Bartlett, who was a story editor on "Rugrats," and went on to create Nickelodeon's "Hey Arnold!," was to be surprising and risky enough to get children's attention but safe enough so that "parents could leave it on all day"—unlike, say, "Fox, where kids would see a promo for a murder." In 1991, Nickelodeon launched "Nicktoons," which consisted of three new animated shows: "Doug," a sweet, almost melancholy series about a suburban middle-school student; the "Ren & Stimpy Show"; and "Rugrats."

"We set out to be 'The Simpsons' of kids' shows," Paul Germain says. Germain was not a squash-and-stretch guy; he wanted plot-driven shows with well-developed characters. But, almost immediately, Angelica's incorrigibility became a problem. Cheryl Chase, the voice of Angelica, had trouble being mean enough in line readings. One of the writers, Steve Viksten, who subsequently co-developed "Hey Arnold!" with Craig Bartlett, would try to put her in the right frame of mind, saying, "Look. You're the J. R. Ewing of the show."

During the first season of "Rugrats," in 1991, Klasky responded to Angelica's antics more as an overanxious parent than as a working animator. "With everything that came out, I'd ask, 'How would I feel if my kids were watching that?'" she told me. Many of the show's writers, some of whom also had children of their own, found her caution constricting.

"'Rugrats' didn't take this view of childhood as innocent," one of them told me. In the second episode, the script called for Angelica to throw the babies' ball over a fence, precipitating an expedition to the neighbor's yard. Why, Klasky reportedly asked, did Angelica have to be so mean? In another episode, Viksten thought it would be funny if Angelica lost her temper and screamed, "You dumb babies!" Klasky didn't want the



MY KIND

Memory is a tiny room lit
by a wan lamp. The radio plays
soft static but no one minds.

Father yawns. Mother yawns, too,
but hides it behind a hand. I knew
already I was not their child.

My kind never yawned. Alert, we waited
for our time (and wait still).
I yawn, thinking about it.

—LEONARD NATHAN

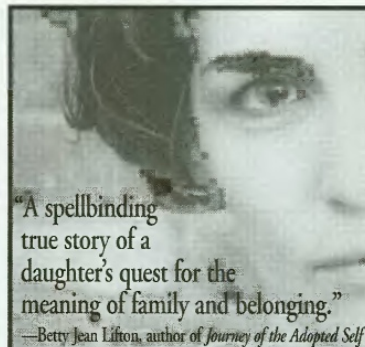
characters gratuitously insulting each other, but the line would eventually make it into a script and become a "Rugrats" signature.

Tensions escalated in a subsequent episode called "The Trial," which satirized recovered memory. Angelica urged Chuckie to confess that he had broken Tommy's favorite clown lamp, even though he didn't remember having done so. "That's where we established her," Germain says of Angelica. Klasky later told me, "I felt strongly that we needed a bully, but that we needed to counter how mean-spirited she was." The writers ended the episode with a Perry Mason moment in which the other Rugrats drew a confession out of Angelica. "I did it and . . . there's *nothing* you babies can do about it 'cause *you can't talk*," she taunts. Unfortunately, Didi overhears, and Angelica gets "the chair," a.k.a. a timeout. From that point on, Klasky frequently complained that the babies were too grown-up. Many of the writers mimicked the "Rugrats" characters, and Klasky sometimes lapsed into baby talk in voicing what she wanted. "By the end of the first season," one former staff member says, "she was driving some of us crazy."

AFTER its first year, "Rugrats" won a Daytime Emmy Award for Outstanding Animated Program. Yet by its second season, in 1992, the show was being run by warring generals. What's more, Csupo and Klasky's marriage was collapsing. Both of them, however, continued to work on "Rugrats," and Csupo often tried to mediate between his wife and the writing staff. Csupo, writers remember, tended to agree with them. "I was always pushing as far as good taste allowed," he told me.

By then, the show's growing popularity was inspiring comparisons to "Our Gang," even though one of the show's former story editors, Joe Ansolabehere, recalls, "Paul always hated 'Our Gang.' To him, the point of 'Our Gang' was to give kids lines they would never say, watch them screw it up, and that's the joke." The "Rugrats" writers were actually more closely in tune with "Peanuts." Craig Bartlett explains, "That was a major breakthrough in giving characters a psychology. Up till then it was anvils falling and shit." He goes on to say, "Charlie Brown was dealing with his depression, Linus was obsessed with his blanket—these were post-Dr. Spock ideas. . . . I thought, Holy cow, there's a cartoon character that's bummed out. Bugs Bunny was never bummed out."

"You know what I'm tired of doing?" Germain asked at the beginning of the "Rugrats" second season. "These 'wreak havoc' episodes. They're never any good." (The episodes were described to me as "The Rugrats go to an office building and wreak havoc, the Rugrats go to a toy store and wreak havoc, the Rugrats go into a grocery store and wreak havoc.") Germain wanted to explore emotions: Why was Chuckie so afraid? Why was Angelica such a rotten kid? The writers look back on this as "the Golden Age of 'Rugrats,'" though



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a Nickelodeon story editor at the time sometimes criticized the adult-oriented "Rugrats" scripts as being "too 'Thirty-something.'" In later shows, the source of Angelica's brattiness was revealed: viewers met her parents, who were too busy with their careers to raise her properly. In "Runaway Angelica," she floods her father's home office with paper from the fax and copy machines, and when she is sent to her room she plots to run away. Hiding out in Tommy's yard, she shakes down the other Rugrats for cookies, and then spies her father inside next door. She overhears him musing that it is nice to occasionally escape the responsibilities of parenthood. Angelica bursts into the house, sobbing, and apologizes for all her past transgressions. "Take you back?" her father asks. "Honey, I didn't even know you were gone!"

When her meanness was exposed as neediness, Angelica became, if not nicer, then more complex. "She's an extremely vulnerable girl," Coffey assured me. "She's just hostile and angry." But her essential unpleasantness remained unchanged. In "Pickles vs. Pickles," Angelica sued Charlotte and Drew for making her eat broccoli. ("I think I can get your parents kicked out of the house," her lawyer assured her.) By now, some of the tensions on the show were finding their way into the scripts. For example, the writers parodied Klasky's passion for child-care experts by making Didi Pickles ever more slavishly dependent on a pompous child psychologist named Dr. Lipschitz.

By 1993, as "Rugrats" neared the premiere of its third season, the situation reached its predictable Hollywood conclusion: Germain was out (he eventually went to work for Disney, where he developed the highly rated Saturday-morning cartoon series "Recess" for ABC), and the members of his writing team who hadn't already left the show did so in his wake. (The "Rugrats" creators are now prohibited by a legal settlement from discussing their split.) Despite winning a second Emmy, "Rugrats" appeared to have run its course, and in 1994, Nickelodeon ordered no new episodes. Still, Germain had left one extremely valuable asset behind: there were sixty-five episodes, the number re-

quired to send a show into syndication at Nickelodeon.

The year that "Rugrats" ceased production was also the year that it became a hit. Nickelodeon's president, Herb Scannell, who is a programming wizard, decided to broadcast the show every evening around dinnertime, and, as any parent can tell you, small children delight in repetition. Almost overnight, "Rugrats" became one of the most popular programs on cable, with twenty-three million viewers a week. Advertising and licensing deals took off, and in 1996, after two years of steady reruns, the show went back into production. Klasky and Csupo were repeatedly described in the press



as creative geniuses, and their consistent failure to fully credit Germain compelled eight former "Rugrats" writers to sign a letter of protest to the Los Angeles *Times*.

TODAY, Klasky Csupo's animation studio takes up almost half a city block. Two battleship-gray buildings are decorated with cartoon characters from their shows, including their latest Nickelodeon hit, "The Wild Thornberrys." Csupo's office displays "Rugrats" three Daytime Emmy Awards, and a foot-high stack of issues of *Variety* with Klasky and Csupo on the cover; Burger King Kids Club Meal Rugrats toys share a shelf with boxes of Kraft's Rugrats macaroni and cheese. Csupo, a smallish, laconic man with a Mephistophelian beard, is more philosophical than his ex-wife is about the break with Germain. "It happens in every single production," he says, of the personality conflicts.

When "Rugrats" resumed, Klasky Csupo hired the writing partners J. David Stem and David N. Weiss, whose previous experience included CBS's "Cybill" and Nickelodeon's "Roundhouse," as well as a final polish on "Anastasia." They then hired the husband-and-wife team of Jon Cooksey and Ali Marie Matheson, whose "strong suit," according to a Klasky Csupo book about the making of "The Rugrats Movie," is "heartfelt moments." The new episodes of "Rugrats," which began airing last year, have some daring

turns, but the edge has been softened with sentimentality.

The new team claims to love Angelica just as much as Germain did, but it seems to be a tough love. "She's actually my favorite," the story editor Kate Boutilier says. "I try to monitor how many times she says 'You dumb babies!' because it makes her look cruel, and she isn't cruel." (Boutilier also watches Angelica's weight. "I always count how many times she's motivated by food," she says.) "Some people around here felt you can't soften Angelica, but I just think it lends a whole new element," Boutilier explains.

In 1996, when Klasky Csupo got approval from Sherry Lansing, at Paramount, to develop a "Rugrats" feature film, the new team worked up a standard adventure tale that owes a great debt to Disney. The color is lush, there are dramatic, cliff-hanging moments, and it has a hip soundtrack, featuring artists like Jakob Dylan, of the Wallflowers. The sly jabs at yuppie values have mostly been replaced by pee and circumcision jokes, one of which struck my son as so funny that he almost had to be resuscitated.

Angelica is, once again, the catalyst. Fed up with the babies' squalling and fighting over Tommy's new baby brother, Dil, she sends them careering out of the house in the Reptar Wagon, one of Stu Pickles's strange inventions. But then, while the other Rugrats are having adventures in the woods, Angelica simply brings up the rear, tracking the babies because she believes that they've kidnapped Cynthia, her beloved doll. Her only big scenes would have been considered out of character a few years ago: she now bravely steps between the babies and a hungry wolf, and then weeps when she believes that the wolf has mortally injured Tommy's dog, Spike. Children who once thrilled to Angelica's nasty schemes may be disappointed by her role. But Klasky is delighted. "I think she's great for the show," she told me. "I love Angelica." ♦

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