



By Carita Rizzo

Unsung HEROES

From wolf wranglers to physicists, experts are needed to create Emmy contenders

NICK FLOREZ AND R.J. DURELL
Choreographers on Fox's "American Idol"

Try pulling off the nation's largest talent competition without a choreographer. "You'd have a bunch of kids going on-stage doing nothing, all looking at different cameras," chuckles Florez, who, with partner Durell, makes sure the top 24 knows exactly where to walk, when to turn, and which camera to flash a smile at. Known as the Golden Boyz, Florez and Durell have taught dance moves to Janet Jackson, Madonna, the Spice Girls, and yes, Britney Spears, for that VMA performance we're all trying to forget. But the next "Idol" isn't likely to possess these performers' dancing skills. "This is a chance to work with new talent and hopefully make an impact on the artist that they become," Durell says. The biggest challenge? Season 9 winner Lee DeWyze. "He has this swagger, so we would always have to have someone else push him from behind or grab his hand and pull him out!" Florez says. But according to Durell, even DeWyze's two left feet couldn't hold a candle to the Alice Cooper number in the finale. "I feel that the hardest number to choreograph was 'School's Out for Summer,'" Durell says. "Not only did we have to work with all of the idols, but we had 20 kids to put into the number with no rehearsal." Time dedicated to learning the infamous group numbers is limited. The boys get one hour the day before the performance, and one the day of. But it's not just dance moves that the choreographers provide: A little moral support helps, too. "These kids have

been knocked down by Simon (Cowell) and they're all sad," recalls Florez, 34, who, like Durell, 32, began his career as a dancer. "The best part is seeing the contestants grow throughout the season," Durell says. "They really come in as amateurs, and to see them leave as professionals, that's definitely rewarding."

DONNA NELSON
Chemistry expert on AMC's "Breaking Bad"

When the American Chemical Society — an organization with more than 160,000 members — interviewed executive producer Vince Gilligan for one of its journals, he said he was getting most of his information from Wikipedia because he couldn't afford to hire an expert on organic chemistry. That's when Nelson offered her services. "We're always complaining about how producers don't get it right," says Nelson, who teaches at the University of Oklahoma and admits she'd never seen the show when she contacted Gilligan. "I thought, 'This is an opportunity for me to make a contribution.'" Although she rarely gets asked about the drug aspect of the show — AMC uses a DEA agent for that — there have been some real mind-benders. "One day I got a request asking how much meth could be made from 40 gallons of methylamine," she says, laughing. "And they said, 'Make sure to give us the answer in pounds.' And right after that came the scene where they break into the storage facility and roll out a 30-gallon drum of methylamine."

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— Donna Nelson, chemistry expert

Nelson is impressed with the writers' desire to make science interesting to the classroom as well. "There are other ways to do some of the things Bryan Cranston does on-screen, but (Gilligan) picks the most sensational — and I think that is good because it attracts the interest of the audience," she says. She also defends the series from "people who say that a show about synthesizing methamphetamine shouldn't even be on the air. But the way he has presented it, I don't think anybody is going to go, 'That is the way I want to live. I want to run around the desert in my underwear, wearing a lab apron.'" Could Nelson, if she ever had to figure out the meth part? "It is a fairly trivial synthesis," says the professor, whose specialty is organic chemistry. "I mean, people with very little expertise are doing it in their kitchens, and so I'm quite positive I could if I wanted to."

LISA WING
Nursing consultant on Showtime's "Nurse Jackie"

When it comes to making a hospital environment look real for TV, emergency room nurse Lisa Wing is an old pro. Since working as a consultant on "Meet Joe Black," she has shared her expertise on "Autumn in New York," "Bringing out the Dead" and NBC's "Third



“The motivation is generally food,” Martin says. “That’s how you get them to run and jump and hit you, and stand real still.”

Martin, 62, who started assisting movie animal trainers and helping take care of their animals while still in high school, doesn’t care much for small talk, giving off the no-nonsense vibe you’d expect from a guy who has spent 40 years working with animals on film. Today he owns about 60 of them, the majority hand-raised.

“Most of the animals we raise we’re very intimate with,” he says. “They build up a trust and rely on you.” That bond makes all the difference. “I have an African lion that would eat you if you got aggressive around him,” he cautions. “But he’s a damned good worker.”

Animals, like humans, vary in their work ethic: Some are slackers, some outgoing, and some show more aggression. So it can take three animals to complete just one scene. “It’s a lot of work,” Martin says.

For one notable bar scene, where an entire tavern goes crazy in front of a howling wolf, Martin took the cast through the brawl in stages. “You don’t right off the bat have 50 people going crazy with a wolf floating around,” he says. “You have them mimicking going crazy in a bar so you can see how the wolf is going to react. And then you have them step it up a little bit and go for it. It’s all broken into safety.”

DAVID SALTZBERG
Science consultant on CBS’ “The Big Bang Theory”

Long before “The Big Bang Theory’s” Sheldon (Jim Parsons) and company debate their science experiments, one man makes sure they’re plausible. That’s Saltzberg, 43, a professor of physics and astronomy at UCLA.

Before each episode, he goes through the script, correcting what’s there and adding bits and pieces. “It’s fun to put in modern contemporary stuff that’s going on this year in physics,” says Saltzberg, Skyping from Geneva, where he is working on the real “Big Bang” lab — the one that was supposedly going to create a black hole and swallow the Earth, but didn’t.

“For example,” he adds, “these things called ‘super solids’ have been mentioned on the show and that is a very hot topic right now.”

To most viewers super solids and such matters sound like gibberish, but even the smallest mistake can be irritating to a real-life scientist. “The writers could do all the comic book, movie and TV references, but they wanted to make sure that the science wasn’t going to be attacked,” Saltzberg explains, noting he is on set for every taping, in case there’s a physics emergency.

A case in point: “Leonard (Johnny Galecki) was drunk at the end of last season and dropped a bottle down the elevator. One of the writers thought the sound of the crash was too soon for four stories. So I did a quick calculation in my head and he ran off and changed it.”

In Leonard and Sheldon’s man-cave, the whiteboards are Saltzberg’s blank canvas where he gets to create eyebrow-raising formulas, like the one that examines whether or not giant ants could exist. “You don’t have giant ants, because the weight of the ant increases with the cube of its size, but the strength of its legs only increases with the square of its size, so if you made a giant ant you would break its legs,” he explains, leaving this writer as baffled as the show’s producers.

“He looks at us like remedial-level students,” jokes executive producer Bill Prady. “But his ability to do science at show business speed is invaluable.”

So has Saltzberg caught the showbiz bug? Maybe. “A lot of what’s attractive about physics is you get to work with smart, creative people — and it’s the same thing in television,” he says. “I love it.” **THR**

Watch.” But for the Emmy-nominated Edie Falco vehicle “Nurse Jackie,” even she attended an audition, of sorts. “Edie was doing some background research to see what it was like being a nurse,” Wing recalls. “She was doing a walkthrough in the ER and she asked me a quick question. We talked for maybe a minute. I guess it was a good minute.”

Since that brief encounter, Wing has been the go-to person on set, ready to guide Falco and her co-stars through the act of performing medical procedures convincingly. “They have me there to show all of the actors how people would act in emergency situations, whether it’s trauma coming in, speaking to a patient, or just taking gloves on and off,” she says. “It amazes me how quickly they can pick things up. I was actually sitting on the set once with the writers and I said, ‘I am so proud of them. Look at them — it took me years to learn that.’”

But it’s no wonder the cast is picking her skills up so fast. Wing says they’re so eager to learn they’ve even taken turns shadowing her at work. “They want to see the real thing, they want to see how it happens,” Wing says. Falco, however, hasn’t returned since that first tour of the ER. “She felt that it was kind of wrong to be watching people when they’re at their most desperate. That is the human side of her, and that’s why she is so wonderful.”

For Wing, spending her four days off-duty on the set of the Showtime dramedy is an interesting departure from her job as the head nurse at New York’s Bellevue Hospital, where she has tried — unsuccessfully — to keep her second job a secret. “One of the other nurses (consulted) for me a couple days when I couldn’t be there, and she wound up in one of the scenes, so the cat got out of the bag,” she says. “By the end of season two more people knew and I got a lot of questions. A lot of nurses love this show, and sometimes I say, ‘Are you just saying that because I’m the head nurse?’ And they’ll laugh and say, ‘Absolutely not.’”

STEVE MARTIN
Animal wrangler on HBO’s “True Blood”

“How many times did you get killed today?”

That’s the way Martin’s wife greets him whenever he comes home from work. And the answer is usually three.

Which isn’t surprising for the man who supplies “True Blood” with eight wolves and a black panther, presenting a cut of meat to the animals while holding it to his chest, and letting them pretend they are eating him alive.