

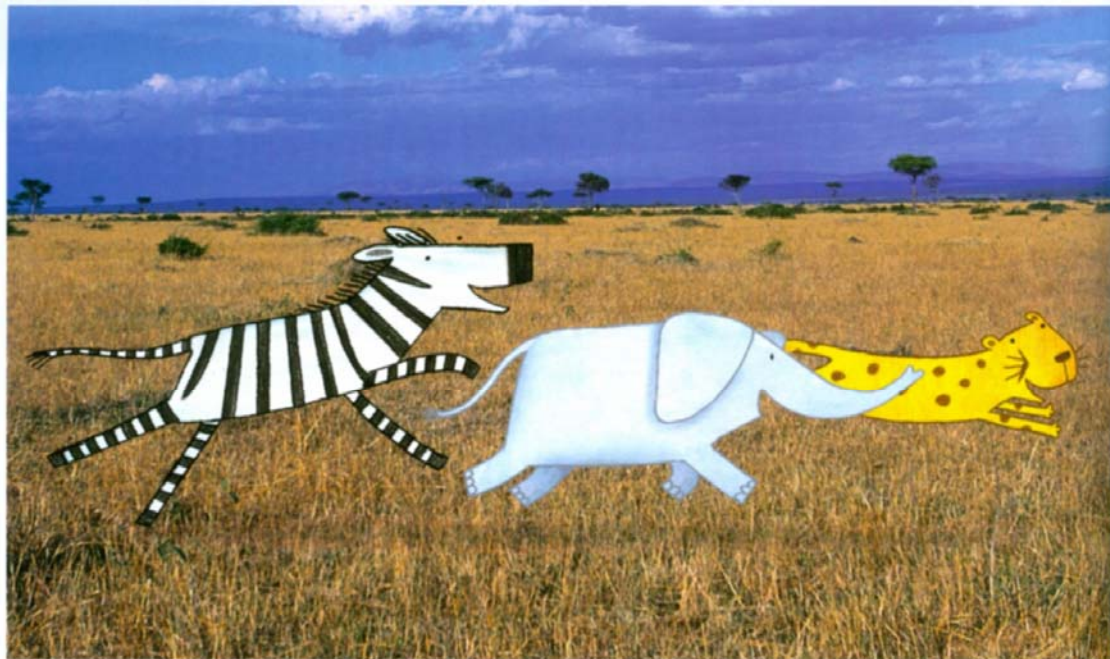
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Wild at Heart

National Geographic Kids, BBC and King Rollo Films offer a delightful new preschool show which combines 2D animation with live-action wildlife footage.

by Ramin Zahed



Leo Nielsen



Donna Friedman Meir

If you set out to create a series that mixes beautiful European-style 2D animation with actual wildlife footage, you're lucky if you get your hands on a single source of nature documentaries. You know you've hit the jackpot when you are granted full access to two of the world's most acclaimed and richest resources in the field, National Geographic and the BBC. That was the case with the beautiful new preschool show *Mamma Mirabelle's Home Movies*, which premieres this month on PBS Kids.

The idea for the show came about several years ago, when the team at National Geographic Kids, led by president Donna Friedman Meir (also *Mama's* exec producer), set out to create a project that would utilize the company's fantastic footage vaults. "When I first got to National Geographic, I recalled that there was a show called *Really Wild Animals* that had aired on CBS some 14 years ago and had stood

the test of time," notes Friedman Meir. "Our goal was to create memorable characters and stories around this idea that would mix animation with our footage, so we put it out there to the creative community."

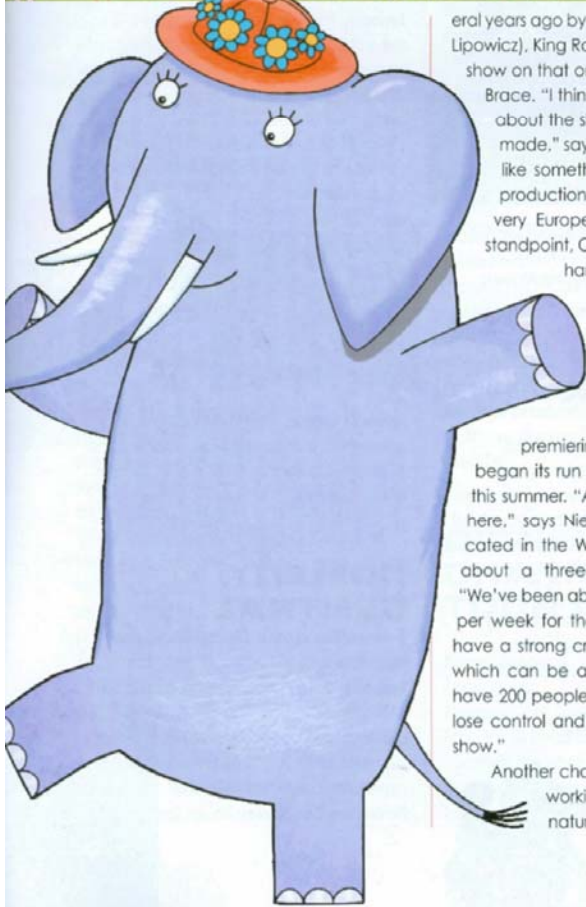
After various development changes, an original concept art work by illustrator Eric Broce became the inspiration for U.K.-based King Rollo Films' director Leo Nielsen (*Spot, Maisy, Paz*), co-exec producer Tara Sorensen (*Dragon Tales, Rolie Polie Olie*) and story editor Andy Yerkes (*Bear in the Big Blue House, House of Pooh*).

The premise of the show should delight both parents and their impressionable preschool kids. Anchored by the voice of Vanessa Williams, who also sings a few numbers for the series, *Mamma Mirabelle's Home Movies* centers on a kind and sassy elephant/maternal figure who cares for a group of baby animal characters from the African Savannah. The wide-eyed ele-

phant calf Max, the know-it-all cheetah Bo, the sweet-natured zebra Karia and the three hyper-monkeys Kip, Flip and Chip gather around Mirabelle in each episode to learn about the wonders of the natural world.

"Part of what makes the show unique is that it combines the best of what our division promises, which is wrapping the best of what National Geographic does around something new for kids," notes Friedman Meir. "You have this gorgeous, informative footage which provides young viewers with information about the natural world and these loveable animated characters which they can relate to."

The task of creating the subtle soft-hued animation of the show fell into the hands of well-known British animator Leo Nielsen and his team at King Rollo Films. Using the popular CelAction software (created sev-



eral years ago by Andy Blazdell and Simon Lipowicz), King Rollo based the look of the show on that one single drawing by Eric Brace. "I think one of the great things about the show is that it looks hand-made," says Nielsen. "It doesn't look like something created by a huge production company, and it feels very European. From a production standpoint, CelAction helps us get this hand-drawn feel with shadows and crayon work, without having to send the work to Poland or Prague as was the case years ago."

Although the show is premiering this month stateside, it began its run on BBC CBeebies earlier this summer. "Audiences seem to like it here," says Nielsen, whose studio is located in the West Country of England, about a three-hour drive to London. "We've been able to deliver one episode per week for the past nine months. We have a strong crew of about 24 people, which can be a good thing. When you have 200 people involved in a show, you lose control and the intimate feel of the show."

Another challenge for King Rollo was working with the live-action nature footage from the BBC,

which was created in the standard British PAL, then converting it again to the NTSC format for the U.S. version. This cross-cultural mix also impacted the voice cast for the series. Besides Vanessa Williams, who does the lead voice, all the other character voices are recorded in the U.K. by British actors. Even the U.S. version of the show utilizes a cast of voices from the other side of "The Pond."

Apart from the technical idiosyncrasies of the production, what seems to make the show a natural winner is its gentle messages and arresting visuals. "We've tested the show in three different stages of production," notes Friedman Meir. "We got feedback from both kids and parents and each time we learned a lot. One question that we had was whether we could jump back and forth between animation and live action. We found out that the kids didn't miss a beat. The accents weren't an issue, either. All the detail work that went into the research helped us. With the unique color palette and the world music [the show has 10 original songs], I think Mamma will be a real signature show for all the networks that air it." ■

Mama Mirabelle's Home Movies premieres on PBS Kids on September 8. For more info, visit www.pbskids.org/mamamirabelle.

Fall Forward: TV Toon Preview

It's not easy keeping track of all the hot new animated shows debuting on the networks and the cable outlets this month. We know our readers don't want to miss a single thing, so we did the leg work to track down some of the top new shows premiering on the small-screen in the next couple of months:

Name of Show: *Mama Mirabelle's Home Movies*

Synopsis: A warm-hearted show about a sassy, soulful elephant host named Mama Mirabelle (voiced by Vanessa Williams) and the young animal characters she cares for on the African savannah. The series combines an animated world with stunning wildlife movies from the National Geographic and BBC award-winning archives.

Production Companies: National Geographic Kids Entertainment, BBC/CBeebies and King Rollo Films



Premiere Date: The weekend of Sept. 8 (check local listings).

Name of Creator: Based on an original concept by Wild Brain and George Evelyn.