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JONATHAN ROGERS, HOST: At The Rabbit Room, we're always saying that art nourishes community and community nourishes art. Here's another way to say the same thing. We can all be allies in bringing good, beautiful, true things into the world. One way you can be an ally with the musicians and writers and artists whose work you care about is to leave a review. It helps other people find and benefit from the work that has meant something to you. And if you want to leave a review for this podcast... well, that'll be okay too.

(THEME MUSIC)

JR: Welcome to The Habit Podcast: Conversations with Writers about Writing. I'm Jonathan Rogers, your host.

Chris Wall is a film producer in Nashville. He was at Big Idea Productions for 11 years, working on *VeggieTales* and *3-2-1 Penguins!* and other projects. He produced a *Wingfeather Saga* short film in which he was the voice of Janner Igiby, and he's also the executive producer of the *Slugs & Bugs* television show.

Chris Wall, thank you so much for being on The Habit podcast today.

CHRIS WALL: Glad to be here. Thanks for having me.

JR: This was not an easy day for you to make time [CW chuckles] — I don't know what exact day it's gonna air, but today, the day we're recording is the release date for the *Slugs & Bugs* television show.

CW: It is... first time for families to get to see the whole thing, and it's been fun. I've gotten texts already from friends and family with photos of their kids watching the show, and it's pretty great.

JR: So you are the producer of *The Slugs & Bugs Show* — you're gonna have to help me out here because I'm not in that business. Tell me what a television and film producer does, and — this may be a complicated answer but —

CW: Nah, I can simplify it! So, we have to go to sports analogy.

JR: Okay, good.

CW: Can we work this? Okay, so... a producer is a lot like a coach.

JR: Okay.

CW: Okay, so if we use football as that sort of template, it's about organizing the resources to best accomplish whatever goal that is.

JR: Okay.

CW: So in this case it's a creative goal, uh... and the nuance of that relationship to the talent, right? So the quarterback being possibly the director if you were to go that far with this analogy, um, and then the different players being the key positions, your talent or cinematographers or editors — all those talent pieces. The producer is the one in charge of deciding which talent is the right ones to have for this project.

I had my family ask me, "Hey, did you have so and so from *VeggieTales*?" And you know and there's — there were some elements where the talent aligned perfectly. Like Kurt Heinecke, composer, to bring in musically on *Slugs & Bugs* 'cause they were very similar. You know, with *Wingfeather* — a very different kind of thing. And so a lot of that talent pool stayed on that project, didn't cross to *Slugs & Bugs*. So It's just a very different kind of thing.

Producing between film, television, and theater is also very different. So

um... in television — and, there's a funny thing that occurred some years ago where there's always someone who pitches the idea, right? Hey, what if we did a thing about a thing. That person is the one who then is kind of responsible creatively to make sure that whoever buys that — whether that's a network or a studio — gets that. Right?

JR: Okay.

CW: So, they get “I got a thing with the Tom cruise doing a thing with the thing with the helicopter.” Right? Great, we want that. Okay? Somebody's responsible creatively. Now there's other people that are responsible in produciary ways. There's other people that are responsible in marketing ways. But one person is responsible creatively. Um, the producer sits in that role, making sure that's what delivers.

Now, they'll use a director. In film, that's a significant role because the director's gonna make so much of the voice of that film. In television, the director is sort of a lesser role —

JR: Huh!

CW: —in that they're the ones that — who call the shots. It's gonna be a wide shot then a close shot. They describe how the thing sis gonna be shot. But the executive producer, whoever that creator is, oversees all that to make sure it stays on target. That it becomes a thing.

So networks got frustrated with that thing a few years ago and coined the term “showrunner.” You may have heard that.

JR: Yep, yep.

CW: And that is someone who runs the creative, top to bottom, for a whole series of television. Uh, so that's my role. So I —

JR: You're the showrunner for *Slugs & Bugs*.

CW: I'm the show runner. I got pitched the idea, "What if Randall did a TV show for *Slugs & Bugs*?" And it was well, "Maybe we can just have him with some kids singing some songs and it be a little of that, right?" And then I pitched back, "What if it was a character-driven show?" We make a world populated with characters, Randall's the host, da da da. And I pitched that back. The network basically, if you will, bought that and like, "Yes, we want that."

JR: Okay.

CW: Now it's my job to find the writers that we need for that, to find the cast we need, to build the characters... right, all that sort of thing. So anyways. Long explanation, but that's — producer does shift a little bit. And then the title is executive producer, but there's a lot of executive producers. Cause you've got producers who are the money people, who kind of organize the deals, you know. Uhh, and there's these executive producers who are the creative. So I fall into that bucket.

JR: Gotcha, okay. And is there somebody who's title on this show is executive producer?

CW: Correct, Brock Starnes. So we both are executive producers. I often introduce myself as producer because that's what people understand, cause I'm the boots on the ground making the thing. Uh, and Brock is kind of the business side, if you will, closing the deals, doing the contracts and all the talent. I go find the talent and he does the deals.

JR: Okay. So you said you — somebody pitched the idea of a *Slugs & Bugs* TV show to you, but they didn't pitch the idea of what the show is.

CW: Correct, yeah.

JR: Do you have any — can you even answer this question? How did you get to, "I hear this music that Randall has been making for ten or twelve

years now, and I think that could be a narrative world?”

CW: Yeah, let me go back to — I think it was 2005 or 2006. Kurt Heinecke, who was doing music for us at Veggies, came back from Ryman Behold the Lamb of God having played with Andrew, and Andrew handed him the *Slugs & Bugs* —

JR: Andrew Peterson.

CW: Andrew Peterson, sorry. The *Slugs & Bugs and Lullabies* very first CD. And he brought it to the office — “Hey Chris, there’s this really fun project. You should listen to it.” I have a *strong* aversion to kids music projects, [laughs] so I did *not* open it. I turned and handed it to my sweet wife and said, “Hey babe, look, a Christian kids CD.” And she went, “Haaaaa you’re terrible.”

Called me the next day in the van, and said, “Honey, did you listen to this at all?” And I said, “Huh, I didn’t even open it.” She’s like, “It’s great! We love it. You need to listen to it.” So I went home and listened to it and was delighted. It reminded me of the Smothers Brothers. The relationship that Andrew and Randall had, this kind of straight man / funny man... but just this warm camaraderie. There’s just something in there. And so I actually ended up inviting the two of them to write some Silly Songs with Larry for Veggies.

JR: Oh, okay, that’s how they first —

CW: That’s how I first met Andrew, first met Randall, was through Silly Songs.

JR: Okay, uh huh. I knew they’d done some Silly Songs, I knew you were at VeggieTales, but I didn’t realize that’s how all that happened.

CW: Yeah, and then of course Randall has gone on with it. But for me, that was the core. There’s something here in how these songs came to life.

There's this story between Andrew and Randall. There's this story between some of the characters who are referenced in different parts of this. There's something.

And so, uh, the New Zealand series *Flight of the Conchords* does a lot of that. [JR laughs] Basically so — definitely a nod to what they were doing about how — where did the tiger song come from in Slugs? Where did “Tractor, Tractor” — which is the first one we did — where did that come from? Well, that was fun to think of that. Well of course Andrew would have a tractor that he's excited about, you know? And think about how that song could unfold and let that moment which is in the CDs — it's a very funny turn where Randall's singing a song and Andrew kinda takes it a different direction and it's very silly — let that unfold right for the audience. So that was an easy one. And then each song was kind of that way.

Now some are more thematic, right? Where they don't have a story narrative inside. And so then it's thinking about how applicable is that song? And so I kinda define one of two ways for our writers that we would get to a song. One is we would just go into a song cold. That we walk into the workshop and Randall's been working on something out of Scripture or life experience and boom — we hit a song. And then the rest of that episode we just sort of explore the thematics of that song. Others we would have an adventure, some experience the characters go into, and then the song kind of comes out of that. So either we're expressing the truth or challenging it by hearing it first, or we're finding it and kind of summing up, if you will. And anyways, once built, it was just a matter of figuring it out.

So then the next step in that is obviously who are the characters that populate it? Um, and I — you know — when you build out a cast of course, you have just different characteristics that you're looking for to identify with your audience? So you kind of — it's a little just mechanical, right? You want this type of character who's fun-loving and this type who loves to build. This one who loves to maybe create, this one who loves to

read. We knew the facets we wanted and had built out the workshop to accommodate those spaces that we wanted to encourage.

JR: Oh, I hadn't thought about that. The geography of the workshop has to...

CW: Absolutely, it actually started — that was the very beginning, was we started with the workshop. I knew what I wanted to see for areas that we wanted for the kids to be able to explore and for the cast to be a part of. I sent it out to a wonderful concept artist who just brought that to life. Largely what you see on screen is this very early beautiful concept drawing that she created. Um, Tessa. And then it's just figuring out how the characters live in that space.

It's interesting because I think the different expressions of that are from my years and years of experiencing the Rabbit Room and Hutchmoot. So I remember walking into Hutchmoot for the first time, and Pete had invited me, right, to come speak about film stuff. And I walked in, and I was like, oh this isn't just writers talking about books or musicians talking about songs they were working on, but it was just all these other very specific expressions of creativity. And I didn't think I fit in that crowd and found that I did. That in this very kind of — I don't know, it feels like roughshod media of film and television, I had a thing to offer, right?

And so, largely creating the show was thinking about like, how can I model the halls of Hutchmoot? You know? There'd be somebody who really loves to paint, and oh, we gotta have somebody who loves to bake and cook and make great food, you know?

JR: Yeah, yeah.

CW: I hope that when folks in the Rabbit Room community see it they can pick up on that expression.

JR: Huh, that's interesting.

CW: Oh, and of course we have a library, and the characters loving to read and maybe even thinking about writing. Episode 3 is on two characters are thinking about writing a story. Yeah, of course they are! You know like — so there — a lot of that alignment is there. Where other kids' shows may align for different things, right? You know, about the kid who's into construction stuff. It's a little more broad strokes — I'm an engineer! I'm an astronaut! I'm a doctor! You know? Ours is much more in this space.

JR: That's interesting. Doug the Slug is a reader of the Russians — the Russian novelists. Um... where'd that idea come from?

CW: [laughs] Yeah, so... so we wanted Doug to be a reader, for sure. And then we cast Doug and Sparky as a little bit older, so they're maybe in their twenties, let's say.

JR: [laughs] Okay.

CW: Right, it's just character wise. We wanted Maggie and Morty to be the kids, so that kids watching the show are like, "I'm like Maggie or Morty." Right, if I were them. So Doug and Sparky are older and they've had some — so, honestly it's a very similar line to Bob and Larry. We had kinda targeted them as twenties-ish. They've had some experience, but they aren't too far removed from high school and, you know, that.

And so... yeah in building him out, one of my favorite tweaks was that he knows *everybody*. That anybody walks into the workshop: "Hey Randall! Whats up? Oh Doooouuug, how've you been? I haven't seen you since Cancun!" And they have this — Cancun, you what? [JR laughs] And you know, these crazy stories, like this story about how he knows Ben Shive is some Elvis thing in Vegas, you know. It's like, what? [laughs]

And of course he's well-read, and he happens to have an affinity for — I don't remember where that joke actually — I wish I could attribute which writer that came from or where the source. It gets to be — in the

development of a show, you start with a concept. You know, we're gonna do a show about collaboration. So it's thematic, and we think it would be fun to have Ben Shive as a guest because he's a great collaborator with Randall. Okay great, so there's your cast. And then oh man, it'd be awesome to have one of the singers because he has so many great singers who join. What about Nikki Conway? Okay great, we're gonna have Nikki join.

So once that's said, then it's like, what's the story around that? What's the A plot? What's the B plot? And then we break the story in our writer's room and development. And that ultimately falls to my shoulders to say here's the outline of what's going to happen in this episode. We're gonna do this, this, this. And then off to one of the writers to flesh that out. So, in the middle of all that, it's sometimes hard to know — somebody asked me about a joke that somebody made and I'm like, I don't remember who — I'd have to go deep dive to figure out who actually wrote. Some of these are pretty clear, like I know exactly oh, that was definitely Micah, or that was definitely...

JR: Somebody asked me if Doug the Slug's Russian literature thing was a nod to that other Doug... McKelvey...

CW: McKelvey!

JR: And his affection for Russian literature.

CW: No! In fact it was just ahead of him. And it may have actually been from Randall, but I know that one was set in before joined. So, Doug was late. So, Doug — love Doug McKelvey. And we were in kind of this darkest hour of needing to finalize these scripts and get them locked in, and frankly... finding the right tone for a show like ours is difficult. And it's not unlike the experience I had in creating VeggieTales where you have a particular voice, that is, is... entertainment first with strong, uh... spiritual teaching underneath, right? And a ray of insight. And we really worked for what we in the Veggie world call the "nugget of truth." What are we

teaching? What is the child gonna walk away with? It's the little nugget they're gonna leave with.

And you can find writers who can write really interesting spiritual insight things, but it'd just be boring, right? It'd just be meh. Or it'd be saccharine sweet, right? It's not our thing. Or it's really funny, it's punchy, it's some of the best writing you'll get, but all the spiritual references feel tacked on. And what we want is this authentic expression. That like you and I — we are in our families' lives, we're in the culture we live in, and we enjoy having fun and can make — it's like following Dr. Moore on Insta or Twitter, right? [JR laughs] He is like the perfect — like, he can speak about the deepest theology, and then just talk about how much he loves the latest Star Wars or whatever. There's this fluidity that's very casual. And that's what we wanna do on the show.

So in the writers, that was challenging, you know. Finding the right people. And we got ah, Marshall was one of our writers that really brought it home as well and Drew — but uh, Tori rather, and Micah. But one of the challenges there is getting a particular flavor that feels, for me like The Rabbit Room. It's the community that so many of us are in, and can weigh some of that in. I had forgotten that Doug McKelvey was a screenwriter. [JR: "mmhm."] One of the *many* talents this guy has, and he's — I know he's very funny. If you don't follow him on Facebook or Insta you need to because he's *very* funny. Um, and I was like, "We need to call Doug in." And he came along and he and I just... [snaps fingers]

One of the other things in a writers' room is like any musicians. You gotta connect. It doesn't matter how talented that other person is, if you don't have a rapport and an ability to quickly work and laugh at the same things, you're just — it's a tough road. And I've had many writers over the years that I've hired that — *great* writers, but we just didn't... there wasn't a thing. We couldn't get anything moving with the rest of the team. And so, it's not a credit issue for them. It's more of a, "Does it work in the room." And with Doug it was like... it was amazing. And he and I... my face was pained every day going home just laughing so much, 'cause he and I just

— same type of comedy and same type of humor, you know?

JR: Yeah. And and so how much writing were you doing on the show? Were you?

CW: I don't call myself a screenwriter. So on that note, essentially, many executive producers and showrunners are screenwriters. There are quite a few who are not though, who are storytellers. But screenwriting is a very particular craft. It's structural, and dialogue has to be right there as you're driving the narrative spine. And so, I — the structure parts? That's my wheelhouse. Which is interesting, so with Doug he's great with words, he's very funny. His narrative's fine, but he's like "I'm trusting you, Chris. You have a better sense of what we're building here." So that's how that partnership worked. There's some lines of dialogue that I would write. But not many. I'm not a great...

JR: So you're providing a narrative structure to which the other writers are writing?

CW: Exactly.

JR: Like a skeleton.

CW: Usually like a three to six page outline, you know, that maps through. It would have snippets of dialogue here and there if I knew exactly how I wanted the characters to engage on a subject or have an exchange. But largely, leaving that to these great writers to come back and, you know, give us the thing.

JR: Yeah, so how do you... how do you do your job helping Randall create this thing without hijacking... I mean, where it's still Randall's thing.

CW: Oh yeah. Yeah. Same thing. And for Andrew with *Wingfeather*. It was the same process where, um... sometimes what people can do is you can just go, option to work in someone's playground, right? So I can say,

Andrew, I'd like to option *Wingfeather Saga*. I'm gonna go make something out of that, right? And his creative influence and control would be lesser. With Randall I could've done exactly the same. You know. Hey, *Slugs & Bugs*, I'm gonna do this, and you just show up and speak these lines when I tell you to, right?

It was my intention in both cases that I wanted to protect the voice and DNA of what they had done, and to have them as close as possible as it would work, right? And for both guys it was a different experience. Um, Andrew was probably a little further away because I kind of got it and was able to speak his voice. A similar thing happened for me with *VeggieTales*, which it was interesting that you'd say that. Early on, I just kind of "got" Veggie as a college fan. I got one of those early VHS cassettes and played it and was like, "What is this? This is amazing!" You know, it was the *Dave and the Giant Pickle*. And you know, Dave shows up with a pizza for his brothers, and Jimmy leans out the tent and says, [Veggie Character Voice] "Cheese in the crust? That's tremendous!" And I said, "This is my show!" [JR laughs]

Myself and Phil Fischer, who's been a part of Hutchmoot in the past, just had this connection, and Phil was like, "oh you get it! You understand the DNA." And I'm just here to serve that DNA, right? Same way for Andrew and Randall, I'm just here to serve the DNA. Now in the case of Randall, I would say it was more challenging because it was wayyy thinner, like narratively. There was a lot more to create. So there was a lot of me creating something — "What do you think, Randall?" You know. And him having to work through it — "I don't like that, I don't know why." Okay, we gotta figure out why, because we can't stop here. We gotta figure out the next thing.

And so, it's hard work. I gotta be honest. You're deep in the trenches of how would this character respond to this type of thing? Would they make this kind of joke or not? You know, and... it was a... rolled up our sleeves a lot more than even on *Wingfeather*. *Wingfeather* you have four, five novels to pull from that, like, tell you this is what the world is. So it's really just

piecing together through all that, you know? This was listening to a lot of CDs, and then just deciding.

And like so... Morty Raccoon, let's say. This is a character that would've shown up on these CDs, but it was played by an adult male, right? And not a character yet. A funny voice... not a character yet. So... not wanting to break that, but making the character out of that? Those were the kind of things we had to work through.

JR: Interesting. Does Morty appear in the television show at all, or is it just the two little raccoons?

CW: Yeah yeah. So Chauncy, who is the head of the Sowers, does not appear yet, not in Season 1. We're kind of choosing our cast, and knew we needed Randall to play the adult, the responsible adult in the room. So Chauncy was kinda redundant in that. Even though he's a raccoon, we didn't need another adult in the cast. And then we had, of course, Sparky and Doug, and so then it was we needed two kids.

JR: Wait, oh, so Morty is the boy raccoon?

CW: Morty's the boy raccoon.

JR: Oh okay, I get Morty and — I was getting Chauncy and Morty mixed up.

CW: Yeah, yeah.

JR: Alright. Okay. So, one thing... when I'm teaching writing, a lot of times I'm trying to get people out of formulaic ways of thinking, but in screenwriting there's some formulas that you don't have any choice but to conform to. Talk to me about that for a little bit.

CW: There was a lot of tension in creating this show in the writing team. A lot of them had written for some great other properties. And the ruts of

those grooves of how you make kids' entertainment that is 22 minutes in length, that targets this preschool audience, is a deep rut. And I was always intentional in wanting to break that. Without saying, "I know we wouldn't normally talk about this subject in this way with preschoolers, but here we're going to." And it was very intentional. And, so there were structural references to other shows we knew. You know, structurally, in the first 5 minutes this happens. All those important pieces. But then being willing to say, I realize we shouldn't do this for preschool, but we're going to do this, because it's the kind of show we wanna create which is more about attending to families.

So, I think it's important that you know those rules, right? Know the structure and the format and all the things, so when you go and begin to pound against them and say we're gonna go a different way, you will. And it comes out of... we're a homeschool family. Six kids. And we are very much a literature based education. And early on we were told that one of the things that's challenging about having multiple ages in the kids, and you're trying to teach the older kid some deeper concept in literature while the youngsters are sitting around, is the youngsters are lost, right?

And we were encouraged, "Oh, no no no. Keep reading. Read to the older ones, and the little ones will get the crumbs off the table. And they'll begin — they won't get it all — and they'll begin to get a taste for these more mature subjects. And honestly that's what I carried into the show. We know that some phrases and the ways the characters talk wouldn't be what you'd normally do on a kids show, but we're gonna go for this. And we're not gonna take some of the easy routes either. I'm very aligned with Sally Lloyd-Jones where she talks about the respect that we show children, and the kind of things that we offer them.

And I'm not saying that other shows are disrespectful, you know. But in our case we wanted to be respectful to — "I'm gonna talk to you like an adult about something you need to know about. And I'm not gonna ga-ga goo-goo that or make it some kind of sing-songy... make it silly. I'm gonna make it in a way that will be a little robust, and you may not get all of it, but

you're gonna get some of it. And I'm gonna package it in a way that's still entertaining, it has a little sugar on it so it's not too difficult, but we're not gonna shy from it.

So like when we talked about adoption, we could've just played the note of "Adoption's great! It's so wonderful!" But I wanted the counter-note of, "Annnnd complicated." Right?

JR: Actually in Randall's episode of *The Habit*, he talked about this very topic. Adoption and the way that song worked itself out.

CW: Right. Episode after episode, we'd have a screenplay come back from one of the writers, and Randall and I would've read it and we'd meet and talk and both have the same — that's nice, what they're saying about this subject. But it's too off the top. I wanna go deeper.

JR: Yeah, yeah.

CW: Like on creativity. It's not gonna be, if you create something that's really great, you'll win a prize at the local show. Winning a prize has nothing to do with if that creative work was good or bad. Let's get away from the winner script with that. It's very hard on a preschool kid show, when you're trying to do a thin line straight through. Some of these got really tough, I gotta be honest.

JR: What does that phrase mean, "a thin line straight through"?

CW: Well it's like... "Yeah, creativity!" Yeah, make that, "Oh it's wonderful! Celebrate!" And, "You won! And, "Ta-da!" There's no narrative twists in there that are interesting. It's just narrative right through. And in ours, we wanted some narrative twists where a character is going, "I'm gonna make something! It's gonna be great!" And it's... terrible. You know?

JR: I was gonna ask you about formulas...

CW: Yeah.

JR: One thing I've noticed, because I've seen two episodes of the show — 'cause the whole season went up this morning and I haven't had a chance to watch it. But the two episodes I've seen... [pause] It was very clear that you were exploring... I saw the episode on collaboration, which I thought was really interesting to be talking about collaboration for preschoolers. And also very relevant as it turned out. So it was obvious from what you've been saying that you were pushing against the conventions of what people talk about and the way they talk about it. And yet, it's still a 22 — there are still conventions that you're not breaking. The 22 minute — I assume they're all 22 minutes long.

CW: Yeah. Roughly, yeah.

JR: And that's what was interesting to me. That you're still accepting certain expectations and conventions, and then within those conventions, doing something unconventional.

CW: Yeah, so narrative breaks. You know, so act breaks, where you build up to and then have the short segments? Which I really wanted that. I love the kind of breakaway in a variety show style thing where a character goes and does a silly thing for a few minutes. It's just like a commercial break almost. And so that was one of the elements we wanted.

In the show, there is a pressure to start a show... so, some people talk about us like Mr. Rogers, and I think because dear Randall has such a genteel personality, you can't help but draw that. Um, Mister Rogers had a very, uh, predictable pattern about how a show would unfold. And I wanted to push back against that. And every episode, as many as possible, start in different places, in different moments. Where we join something that's already happening, right? That we're not at the beginning of something about to — like we're in the middle.

Collaboration. They're in the middle of already writing and working on

something, right? And Morty and Sparky are in the middle of their imaginary play with their vine swinging around the workshop. It's not that they had the idea and they're gonna go do it. We're in the middle of it. And we don't start in the same place. We're not at the door every time like a Mister Rogers.

Some of those breakups are against norm. In preschool shows, you often want pattern because kids really like patterns. So the countertops in *VeggieTales* is a patterning. Good or bad, I don't know if we'll — [laughs] but I wanted to just start different ways. I just wanted to — it was surprising. When you press play on an episode, we don't know where we're gonna be.

JR: Did people on the team push back against you on that?

CW: Oh yeah. [laughs] My network writers — people who had written for television — they were both pushback, and then also like, it's kinda fun to have those constraints off. And I think we're in that space now where thanks to the rise of all the streaming platforms, we don't have the same boundaries.

One of the boundaries that's been around for years and years and years is adjacency. So adjacency is, well, if I have a television show that's playing to say a six year old girl who's sitting on the couch watching this, the program that comes before and after that show has to keep her in the seat. If I go to a boy program, she will leave the room, and the boy may come in but may not because he was already told not to be there. So gender is a really big one there. Age demographic really drives adjacency in a traditional television, the kind of network where it's being fed down a pipe.

That all got thrown out when we started streaming. Now the child chooses where they wanna go. Well now you have the freedom to have dual genders. And so I wanted to make sure we had a show that had boys and girls present with their different personalities. I wanted to make sure we

had not only the builder kind of kid who's being attended to by our show, but also the more creative kid who wants to write and paint be attended to. That is — some of the limitations of the adjacency of networks didn't allow for that in the past. Now they do.

So in that open landscaping — we joked a second ago about the runtime. Is it 22 minutes... ish? That's not the same anymore, right? I mean if you watch any series on Netflix or Amazon or some other place, they're around a certain... hour... maybe? We had the same freedom where we could really explore the length. And then just... how we're gonna think about who's sitting on the couch. And in our case we always thought about families sitting together.

Incidentally, in talking to colleagues at Netflix, it's a thing they're desperate to get done. They're working really hard to get more family programming. 'Cause what they're seeing in all their data is — same things — is families that, you know, the mom's watching on the TV, the dad's upstairs on the iPad, and the kid's on his iPhone. And they're all watching separate streams of things, but they're not getting families watching together. And they know that's a problem because it actually doesn't build a connection, an affinity. And on our show I want to make sure that we're putting things in here that make mom, dad, and even older siblings want to sit down and watch the show.

JR: Uh huh.

CW: And it's funny because this comes back to Phil and Mike, when they were creating *VeggieTales*, they had done a puppet show on their college campus. And as college kids are wont to do they were aware that when they were entertaining the kids, there were adults present, or other friends of theirs in college. So they're going to throw things into this little kids' puppet show to get those people to pay attention, and to not be alienated either, right? None of the kind of sing-songy, more irritating part of preschool entertainment. That's the same thing we had. That we were just very aware that I have moms, dads, and older siblings, and I wanna make

sure we keep them in.

JR: Yeah, Well I have to say, as a grown person, I found that show tremendously entertaining.

CW: Yay!

JR: It's so fun. It's a funny, funny show.

CW: Which I would say too, is the music. I just have to put a footnote in there because musically in these kinda shows, you can do really simple stuff, kinda plinkity plinkity. We wanted robust things. So we got to pull together some of the *great* Nashville players. We did a session down the street with Stuart Duncan. Kurt Heinecke directed that session and he came out of it like, "I've never directed anything like that in my life." And Jeff came in...

JR: Jeff Taylor.

CW: Jeff Taylor. And of course, Buddy had already been on the show...

JR: Buddy Greene.

CW: It was just... I've got a little footage of that I look forward to sharing someday, that you know, we... they are not traditional kids musicians, but we treated them, and said, "Here's your people."

JR: Yeah. That's so much fun. Alright, I always end these conversations with this question. Well, I'll adjust the question for you. I usually say to the writers, who are the writers who make you wanna write. But I'm gonna say, who are the people who make you want to create?

CW: Yeah, absolutely. It's always kids' stuff. One of my favorite movies of all time, *Dennis the Menace*.

JR: Really? [laughs]

CW: Yeah! [JR laughs] Anything John Hughes with his kids and family stuff. So when you think about *Home Alone*, that territory of just writing authentic people and families. Like, that's how my kids behave. That's how I behave. Minus some of the harsh language, but those are like, that kind of... uh, it's often a writer/director kind of pairings. So, Wes Anderson's little world, the Coen Brothers, who — the characters immediately come to life and are people that I've met. Right?

That is what I'm 100% drawn to and I look for in both the story setting and characters that we want and then the writers that I get to invite to the table. I want that kind of snap where when I read I'm like, only so and so could say that, and you say it in such a way that's so authentic, like I believe it. I don't feel like it's written prose. I feel like you captured a moment in a family's life.

You know, Phil always talked about Veggies as making Sunday School and our church life as kids' normal. So I can talk fluidly about what I experienced at church, and then go right into the hallway at school, and it's one dialogue, and one conversation, and it's making what we experience in the Christian life normal. The everyday, the like the day to day and like the Deuteronomy passage, we're walking along the path and I'm talking to you about a spiritual truth while we mow the yard and do this. That is what I love. When I see it in film, whether it's a western or a kids show, I just love.

JR: I'm sorry, when you see what in a western?

CW: That kind of authentic, like — it's clear that you are really in that town, in the west, in that moment. And so like The Coen — the recent one on Netflix, *The Ballad of Buster Scruggs* — you know, just authentic moments of like, I've been there. I grew up on a farm, so it's, you know, close to me. but that kind of thing. That's what I really respond to.

Because I think we then can align to it as audience and viewers. and can go, yeah, that's my experience, and you're expressing it now. Artistically, but in a way that I can identify and maybe connect to the truth more strongly.

JR: Are there books that make you wanna go make something?

CW: Oh yeah, I mean, you know... for me, I'm a fantasy guy. Right now — this might not work, Jonathan Rogers — but I'm attempting *Lord of the Rings* as a read aloud with my kids?

JR: Okay...

CW: That's a lot of reading... [laughs]

JR: That really is. And a lot of strange words.

CW: So we're halfway through *Fellowship*, and uh... we'll see if I can finish it. But uh, I thought it would be a good try.

JR: I *think* I might've made it through *Fellowship*, but I don't think I made it past that.

CW: [laughs] I don't know if I will. It's tough.

JR: Well, great. Well, Chris Wall, thanks so much for being here. This has been a lot of fun.

CW: Thanks, Jonathan!

JR: And actually, I've learned a ton about how TV works!

CW: Cool!

JR: Thanks man.

CW: Anytime.

(THEME MUSIC)

DREW MILLER: The Rabbit Room is partnered with Lipscomb University to make this podcast possible. Lipscomb has graciously given us access to their recording studio in the Center for Entertainment and Arts Building. We're so grateful for their sponsorship, their encouragement, and the good work they do in Nashville. Special shout-out as well to The Arcadian Wild for allowing us to use their delightful song "Finch in the Pantry" as part of this podcast. Check out their album of the same name for more excellent music.

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