

Interview: Alex Borstein, 'Family Guy' Voice of Lois Griffin, on Her New Role in 'Bordertown'

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CHICAGO – Voiceover artist Alex Borstein is familiar to TV audiences as the legendary Lois Griffin of “Family Guy,” but she also is a stellar character actress, recently in a role on the HBO series “Getting On.” She is back in the animation saddle with a couple of voiceover parts in the new FOX Network show ‘Bordertown.’

“Bordertown” is created by Mark Hentemann and is produced by Seth MacFarlane, the creator of “Family Guy.” It involves the Buckwald and Gonzalez families in a Southwest desert town on the Mexico-U.S. border, and Alex Borstein voices both the Buckwald mother Janice and her hapless daughter Becky. The show is sharp and funny, with the satire that is familiar to Seth MacFarlane animation fans. “Bordertown” premiered on the FOX Network on January 3rd, 2016, and is now on Sunday nights.



Alex Borstein (left), Voice of Becky and Janice Buckwald in 'Bordertown,' and Lois Griffin of 'Family Guy' (right)

Photo credit: FOX

Alexandrea “Alex” Borstein was born in the Chicago suburb of Highland Park, Ill. – she would later write and perform for the set-in-Chicago TV series “Shameless.” After graduating from San Francisco State University, she moved to Los Angeles and joined the ACME Comedy Theater. At the same time, she began to work on animated shows, writing and doing voices (Queen Machina in “Power Rangers Zeo”). In 1997, she joined the cast of “MADtv,” and developed the popular recurring character of Ms. Swan.

She met Seth MacFarlane while working on that show, and joined the voice cast of “Family Guy” at its premiere in 1999. She developed Lois Griffin by joining the writing staff of the series, and also does the voice of Tricia Takanawa. Borstein is an in-demand character actress, with film roles in “Good Night, and Good Luck” (2005), “Dinner for Schmucks” (2010) and “A Million Ways to Die in the West” (2014). From 2013 to 2015, she was Dawn Forcette in the HBO series, “Getting On.”

Alex Borstein talked to HollywoodChicago.com during a promotional tour for "Bordertown," and talked about a career that goes beyond the voiceover microphone.

HollywoodChicago.com: When approaching a new character voice, what is the process of working with the producers, animators and writers to get the right tone?

Alex Borstein: With 'Bordertown,' I knew show creator Mark Hentemann, and years ago he did a show called '3 South' [2002], and I developed this voice that he liked that was a blend between Chewbacca and Kathy Griffin. That show came and went, and then when 'Bordertown' came along he remembered that voice and wanted me to do the daughter Becky.

When the pilot was being developed, he also wanted me to do the voice of the Mom Janice as a temporary for presentation purposes, and that was based on a sweet sounding woman I knew that could be from anywhere. When the show got picked up, Mark got so used to it, that he kept me in the role.

HollywoodChicago.com: Was that similar when you developed Lois Griffin?

Borstein: When I first did Lois, it was a voice I was doing on stage in a sketch. When I did that for Seth, he liked it. So it's kind of a give and take, we just keep working at it until it gets to where we want it to be.

HollywoodChicago.com: 'Bordertown' is ripe for contemporary satire, yet balances that act with very funny character types. How did you think both Matt Groening ['The Simpsons'] and Seth MacFarlane evolved that model forward, to result in the animated form you're practicing in the new show?

Borstein: Absolutely 'The Simpsons' paved the way. They were the show that held the mirror up to our culture, a lampooned it in a way that was totally new, and 'Family Guy' took that baton and ran with it. In 'Bordertown,' we hone in on one specific issue, the towns that are on the border of the U.S. and Mexico – and our timing was such that it has become an issue in the current presidential election.

We started developing the show a year and half ago, long before Donald Trump started yapping about the border wall. Since one animated style has begotten another, and it's more accepted to be racier and to push the envelope a bit more, we seek to lessen bigotry through laughter.

HollywoodChicago.com: What is an example of a voice type that you 'borrowed' from your childhood days in the Chicago area, and did that person ever know or eventually figure it out?

Borstein: I would say Janice Buckwald has a bit of that Midwestern sense in her. There are always voices borrowed from family members and friends. Ms. Swan was a rip-off of my grandmother, Lois is a rip-off of a cousin in Long Island and so on. Voice actors always tend to borrow and steal. That's what art is, stealing something that came before and knowing how to make it new. [laughs]

HollywoodChicago.com: Since you've been on a long running show, at what point in the run or even what episode did you feel the character of Lois Griffin finally became 'established' in your mind and character tone?

Borstein: When I first started doing the show, there were no female writers on the staff, and it was all Seth's creation. He was 25 years old at the time, and didn't have much of a window into the female psyche. [laughs] What he wrote was from his perspective. When I came onto the show, I improvised a bit in the booth, and added some color and spice initially to Lois. That's when they asked me to come and write for the show.

I give Seth credit for making that move, Lois isn't the typical sitcom Mom, she has very dark undertone. She's been a rock groupie, she slept with a lot of people, she's had affairs and has done her share of self medication. She's a fun, fiery red head. She constantly grows and progresses, but I think after the first two seasons, she started to come into her own.

HollywoodChicago.com: How much pressure was there in the development of 'The Simpsons Guy' episode, given that there had been a healthy rivalry between the two shows for many years? Were there rules each of the production staffs had to negotiate before the episode was written?

Borstein: Yes, and really it was 'Family Guy' who begged 'The Simpsons' to do it. They finally said yes, and I think part it was because we have had a lot of people who have worked on both staffs. There is huge respect and love between the two shows – when 'Family Guy' started there were writers who could tell you every episode of 'The Simpsons' backward and forward, so it was a huge honor and a sign of respect when we got to do the crossover show.

Yeah, there were some rules. Our show tends to be more vicious than 'The Simpsons,' and they wanted to step lightly to protect their brand. But there were also very generous about us doing our thing, and result is pretty dark and wonderful. I loved sitting around the table with them, and meeting Julie Kavner [voice of Marge Simpson].

HollywoodChicago.com: Who are your voiceover heroes from the 1960s and '70s age of cartoons, and which of these players had the most influence on how you develop voices, as in 'What Would Mel Blanc or June Foray Do?'

Borstein: The one that really struck me when I was a kid was Shirley Booth in 'A Year Without a Santa Claus' [1974]. And Mel Blanc is just magnificent, all those Warner Bros. cartoons were perfection, and he is a genius. What is different about today is that all of the voices on 'Family Guy' – Seth, Mila Kunis, Seth Green and I – we all have experience in front of the camera, and we're not the hidden mysteries that those older cartoon voices were.



Alex Borstein as Dawn Forchette of HBO's 'Getting On'

Photo credit: HBO

HollywoodChicago.com: How does ‘Shameless,’ in your point of view, best honor its Chicago setting, and have you ever had to step in and say something wasn’t right in the Chicago aspect or tone?

Borstein: Well, I’m not longer doing the writer/producer role on ‘Shameless,’ because the schedule was too close to ‘Getting On,’ but there were a couple of us on the staff that had Chicago roots. We would constantly have to correct smaller things, like the differences between the ‘El’ and the New York City subway.

For the most part, [series developer] John Wells would lead the charge that it was authentic. We would get some flack about it – was it a true picture of the Southside Irish families of today? We found that it was like that, and followed through by shooting exteriors here. Chicago has its own heartbeat, very different from New York or L.A.

HollywoodChicago.com: What is different, in your point of view, between the public ‘celebrity’ that is Seth MacFarlane versus the guy you’ve known since the late 1990’s?

Borstein: It seems that his public image is as a smooth, stylish, Sinatra-type guy. And while that is a part of him, what he is really is a sweet, generous and loyal genius. He’s a homebody with a good heart. His capacity for knowledge is remarkable, remember he brought the ‘Cosmos’ series back to television. He loves science, and he’s very well versed in it.

HollywoodChicago.com: In regards to ‘Getting On,’ what did you personally learn about that end-of-life stage, when people are near death?

Borstein: ‘Getting On’ was eye opening, in how fragile we are all, and how quickly we all will be in that position and age state. When we think about aging, we think it will never be me, but in working with all these older actors, it certainly is all of us. On the inside, none of them felt like they matched their exterior. I learned with age that you do get better, and you also better be good to your kids, so they can take care of you in your old age. But also the good material within the series was a great gift, and very rare to come by, real lightning in a bottle. The character of Dawn Forchette was the pinnacle for me as an actor.

HollywoodChicago.com: What type of role would you like to play before your career is done, that you don’t think casting agents would necessarily consider you for?

Borstein: I would love to portray a bordello madam, a character type like Ian McShane on ‘Deadwood’ – a filthy, hard assed whore monger. [laughs]

“Bordertown” is on Sunday nights on FOX Network, check local listings for scheduled times. Featuring the voices of Alex Borstein, Hank Azaria, Nicholas Gonzalez, Judah Friedlander, Missi Pyle and Efren Ramirez. Created by Mark Hentemann, produced by Seth MacFarlane.



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