

SNOOZE NEWSLETTER

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Next Issue: "My Shooting Diary" and the "San Diego Fires"

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Animals in Film: What Ever Happened To Those "Crazy Chicks"?

by Jean Ashton, director

Before you jump to conclusions about who those "Crazy Chicks" are, let me clarify that they are not women who behave outrageously. I do mean forty-one decorative baby bantam chicken actors, "Crazy Chicks" fresh off the set of my new children's sleep video, "Fuzzy Warm Sleepy Dorm". This past September our "Crazy Chicks" were immortalized on celluloid (actually mini DV tape) on an elaborate "to scale" movie set in Escondido, California.

This two-part article addresses important issues concerning animal welfare and the film industry. Discussion centers on film pre-production issues related to safely and successfully utilizing animals in film and video, including set design/building, location, and crew. The second article addresses post-production issues, including a report on the "Crazy Chick Take Out" adoption event at the Escondido Animal Shelter.



(L to R) GiGi Mullins, Beth Mott-Stenerson, Jean Ashton, and Dorothea Boughdadly

Fuzzy Warm Sleepy Dorm is a revolutionary new video that entertains audiences with hilarious "day in the life" animal antics. It is coupled with music and color therapy to provide an effective relaxation tool that helps ease children of all ages into a peaceful sleep. According to Dr. Beth Mott-Stenerson at the University of Southern Indiana, the Sleepy Dorm series has the potential to be a pioneering brand in an emerging product category known as "Therapeutic Entertainment", a



phrase coined by Dr. Mott-Stenerson to describe the product's function, and the value it delivers to consumers. Based upon her investigation of medical literature and industry trends, Mott-Stenerson predicts that therapeutic entertainment products are not just a passing fad, but are already being developed and tested by leading healthcare researchers. For example, she cited that research at UCLA's Mattel Children's Hospital is currently being undertaken by using comical movies tailored to patient tastes in order to reduce pain, emotional stress, and the perception of time passing during uncomfortable medical procedures (such as chemotherapy). Furthermore, medical studies have shown that many of the techniques employed in this product are beneficial both mentally and physically. In his 2007 *Journal of Advanced Nursing* article, Dr. David Thompson concludes that the last 20 years of research suggests "that music has a number of beneficial effects, including the promotion of sleep, induction of relaxation, reduction of anxiety, and alleviation of pain."

According to Dr. Mott-Stenerson, "Fuzzy Warm Sleepy Dorm is quite literally the feel good video of the year for kids and their parents." In a recent interview, she stated that her assessment of the product from a psychological and therapeutic perspective indicates that the design could induce positive psychological, physiological and emotional reactions that could be very beneficial to the viewer. With regard to her evaluation of the script and pacing of the story and music, she stated that "based upon existing medical research on music and color therapies, Fuzzy Warm Sleepy Dorm appears to be soundly designed to help children fall asleep."

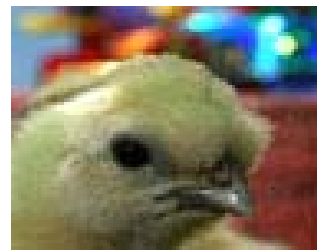
The initial spark for this project was provided by GiGi Mullins, director of "Turquoise". In 2002 GiGi told me about two children's video projects that she had seen years ago, with content focusing on baby faces and construction equipment. "Kids went nuts over them. For years I've had this idea about shooting a video series using baby animal faces," GiGi said, "because kids love animals, and it would be a fun project to produce." I concurred wholeheartedly, having grown up on a hobby farm and truly loving animals.

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A year later I was laying on the couch during a sleepless night, with my eyes blindly fixed on an early morning black and white movie, when several thoughts jumbled through my mind:

...I wish I could just go to sleep...I'd be in a better mood...feel better...I could focus...I'm glad I don't have kids...I wonder how my six siblings got through having newborns...especially colicky babies...you know, that was always their biggest complaint...*"I'M SOOOOOO TIRED!"*

This was my "Viola!" moment: I would give people a good night sleep by integrating my art and film education and experience with the power of imagery, story telling, Mozart and baby animals. Besides, who doesn't love baby animals?



From there, I researched everything on sleep, including scholarly publications, books, and interviews with experts, tired parents, and siblings. There seemed to be a prevalence of adults and children with sleep disorders, with a particular emphasis on getting kids to bed at a decent hour. Research from the American Sleep Apnea Association showed that mood problems in children go hand in hand with sleep disturbances. A deep sense of urgency pushed me forward. I fondly remembered playing with baby animals when I was a kid, and how funny they were when they played. I figured baby animals would captivate any child's attention, recalling my own mornings glued to the TV set with Captain Kangaroo.

From that moment on I was on full steam ahead. I submitted the script to Dove.org and received their "Approved For Family"

viewing status. Just a few months later we finished preproduction with thirty-six White Silkies, four White Crested Black Polish, and one Rhode Island Red; a total of forty-one, five day-old bantam chicks.

An important aspect of our success in keeping our charges safe and sound while filming was because I designed chick-sized sets, around the animals and their innate behaviors. Dorothea Boughdadly, our animal wrangler and a volunteer for the Escondido Humane Society's (EHS) no-kill shelter was instrumental in keeping the babies safe and in good health. Upon arrival,



Dorothea immediately placed the newborns into large white plastic tubs filled with clean wood shavings, food, water, and heaters. The heaters were situated to one side of the enclosure to create both warm and cool areas, so the chicks could self-regulate their body temperature. Her expertise with animals and due diligence on the set ensured complete success; no chicks were lost in shipping, during any stage of the production, or at the adoption event. According to Dorothea, "farmers normally expect a five percent loss during shipping alone."

Imagine my shock later that night as I found what looked like a large number of dead chicks. Panicked, I gently nudged them as they jumped to their feet. Although they'd just been sleeping, they looked as if they'd jumped off a building. According to Dorothea, that sleeping position was 'standard' for our tired travelers.

Before the shoot, we had three days to help the chicks acclimate to humans. All of the crew members regularly petted and talked to babies to help them relax. By the first day of shooting, the chicks were physically and mentally ready. Stage makeup and costuming consisted of pink, green and blue food color gently applied by soft brush. As the first shooting day progressed, they realized we meant them no harm, and having fun and running wild on set! In fact, the Crazy Chicks were in rare form, keeping the crew in 'stitches', and clapping hands over mouths for fear of ruining the sound track.

When designing these eye-popping, ergonomic sets, I focused on natural 'chick behavior' avoiding unrealistic or fantasy behavior as seen in many mainstream, violent animations. I

created a 'living set' using real Scottish Moss. The rolling hills were a natural barrier, keeping the chicks along the cobblestone pathway, and leading them to the day's attractions. The sets and set decorations were water and kid-proof, having no parts breaking off to avoid accidental ingestion. Fake sculpted chicks were used as stand-ins to set up each shot. Whenever the chicks were tired from romping, they snuggled down on set and napped under warm lights. Once rested, they were up and running, giving their 'tour de force'. We ended up with happy chicks, great action shots, and a trampled set.

Our success stems from our close association with the Escondido Humane Society, and the American Humane Society. From the beginning we followed AHS guidelines in order to ensure that no animals would be harmed at any point in the video production. Our animal handler, Dorothea, prepped cast and crew and gave me the manual, "Guidelines for the Safe Use of Animals in Filmed Media", which I put to good use. Traci Chavez, EHS officer, examined the animals, chick 'nursery', holding areas, and the sets, which were all classified as a safe environment. Proper animal husbandry was available at all times with two local veterinarians on "stand by" should any emergencies arise.

The next installment of this article discusses post-production issues, such as the "Crazy Chick Take Out" adoption event. We will also reveal *WHO* adopted the "Crazy Chicks".



Howdy folks. Did you ever get roped into something that turned out to be a barrel of fun? Well that happened to me on "Fuzzy Warm Sleepy Dorm", and here I am.

I was minding my own business and that of the livestock, dogs, cats and other critters at the Escondido Humane Society where I volunteer lots of time, when I get this phone call; a

friend told a friend about me. That in itself is a whole story. Anyhow, I find myself on the phone talking to a lady that wants to meet me in person to discuss how I can help with these animals she wants to make a movie with. At this point my wheels are spinning, head swelling, after all those years of training horses, giving riding lessons and working with every kind of critter you can imagine. Visions of famous equines filled my brain from the films "Fury", "The Black Stallion", and "Flicka".

Finally the meeting occurs and to my surprise the animals I am to wrangle are baby chicks. You can't imagine my surprise. OK, I did spend several years helping Kindergarten teachers obtain fertile chicken eggs from my gardener and supervised incubation, care and feeding as well as final placement of the baby chicks. This prepared me to raise a bunch of my own chicks over the years and is the reason there will always be pet chickens in our family.



Speaking of pet chickens, mine is called Hawk, and she is also partly responsible for getting me the job of wrangler. During a follow up meeting at the family ranch Hawk showed off her unusual traits. She behaved more like a dog than a chicken. This of course is no reflection on my talent as a chicken trainer, but her talent as a dog mimic. She follows us around the ranch to make sure there is nothing edible escaping her vision. Chicken diets are amazingly diverse. Did you know that one chicken can gobble up 35 lamb and rice dog kibbles in about 4 minutes? Did you know that chickens love Carne Asada Burritos? How about horse grain and bran mash? Apples, Watermelon, Bananas, the list goes on and on. We have not even mentioned normal chicken food, like corn, greens and bugs. If you want to see a chicken come running, just grab your garden shovel and start turning the soil for some planting. That's why the vegetable garden has to be fenced. Never mind the wild bunnies that like to nibble the new growth. Nothing can grow if the chicken keeps tilling the earth with the seeds in it. Low and behold, the garden is bug free.

Wow, that subject totally got away from me. Sorry.

The gist of it is that I got the job. Now mind you I was not looking for a job. After all there is a huge place here

with thirty-two critters to take care of and the many hours I spend at the Escondido Humane Society really does not leave any spare time. Of course this was not supposed to take up much more than a few days of my time to get the chicks and finish the film.

Did you ever go into something thinking it was going to be easy and then it kept growing more difficult and pretty soon you are having so much fun facing all the challenges that there is no way you'd ever quit? That totally happened here. The chicks were the easy part. The biggest challenge was set preparation and lending a hand with painting. Wranglers are NOT artists.

So to be asked to paint the cute little racetrack vehicles was scary. It was also the most fun since kindergarten. The boss was generous with praise and let me paint all kinds of things in pretty colors. I never knew how much fun artists can have at work.

Finally all was ready and the chicks arrived. Cute, tiny, sweet baby chicks who needed warmth, food, water, light, clean bedding, sunshine and rest. It was hard not to bother them when they slept as they looked passed out, heads stretched out in front of their tiny bodies. We felt like new mothers, watching over the sleeping babies to make sure all was well. They were taken outside to enjoy sunshine and fresh air, with thermometers in their midst to keep them at the right temperature. Of course they were always monitored, being kept safe from predators and too much heat, or cool air.

Painting the babies with a little food color diluted in warm water was not a problem. One person held the baby and the



other person dabbed the color in the proper place, one color at a time. When all were dried and rested we changed to the next color. The people and premises were a mess afterward. The chicks turned out awesome.

On the set, finally, the little stars got to play on real Scottish Moss. It looked like *Disneyland* for chicks. In order to have the chicks stay in one area it was "seeded" with food items and they would chase each other with choice morsels. During the filming it was difficult to keep quiet while watching the stars run amok and play. If there are any scenes showing me with tears in my eyes, it's from holding my mouth shut so I would not laugh out loud. Whatever you envision will happen with baby chick actors, it's just not so.

They have their own agenda. Their keen eyes do not miss a thing. Tiny beaks picked up and ran off with the props. Of course, there were always other chicks that wanted the stolen item to play with too, so it became a game of chase. The word crowd control came to mind when watching the little ones



scatter on the scenery. As they jumped the barricade from the grandstand to the racetrack, there was not a dry eye left in the studio. We wanted so badly to howl with laughter that it hurt.

As the chicks were being filmed I got to see the camera monitor at times. It looked so very different through the lens than through my eyes, truly transforming the set into a wonderland.

As you see the action, you will know what I mean.

When the filming finished I took the little chicks home with me to get them ready for their forever homes. I'll share that story with you next time.

From the heart,

*Dorothea Boughdadly
Animal Wrangler*

