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'Archer': The sexed-up spy show returns Thursday night on FX

Jan. 26, 2011 | 12:28 p.m.

Michael Giltz checks in with a feature on "**Archer**," the ribald FX spy show that might just as well be called "**James Bondage**."

Start with the unflappable cool of **Matt Helm**, add the rapid-fire dialogue of "**Moonlighting**," mix in enough raunchy sex to make even the cast of MTV's "**Skins**" blush and you've got "**Archer**," the animated comedy that begins its second season Thursday at 10 p.m. on **FX**.

Emmy-nominated for the voice work of lead actor **H. Jon Benjamin**, Archer sprang from the mind of creator **Adam Reed** ("**Sealab 2021**" and "**Frisky Dingo**") who has given us a series about a spy, **Sterling Archer**, who pioneered the tactical turtleneck, repeatedly shoots co-workers when they get on his nerves, sleeps with his mom's secretary but refuses to remember her name (in retaliation, she keeps changing it) and says things like, "Sure I crashed a few cop cars, rode over a few mimes. I don't play by the rules, mother! But I get results!"

Really, though, the show was hatched with just one basic idea in mind: "The



"Archer" (FX)

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genesis of Sterling Archer was trying to see how big of a jerk I could make a character and yet you still root for him,” says Reed, who turns 41 just as Season 2 hits the air and is still waiting for his batch of [Season 1 DVDs](#) from **Fox Home Entertainment**. “You know a lot of it isn’t his fault because his mother is such a mess. A lot of it is Jon Benjamin’s delivery; he can say the most horrible thing and it comes out ... oddly charming.”

The same can be said of the entire series, which is basically a workplace comedy that just happens to be set in a spy agency. Sterling Archer (a.k.a. “**Duchess**”) is the top field operative and very good at his job (though we do get many flashbacks to Archer screwing up previous missions).

His ex-girlfriend **Lana (Aisha Tyler)** is Archer’s equal in every way as a field agent and now dates the nerdy but well-endowed **Cyril (Chris Parnell)**. Archer’s mother (**Jessica Walter**) runs the agency ISIS when she isn’t busy trying to date the heads of almost every other spy agency around the world.

This doesn’t begin to scratch the *very* adult surface of a show filled with the sexiest cartoon characters ever shown on TV, who are often nude (with coyly placed objects to keep things all basic cable), not to mention office drones who engage in constant sexual shenanigans involving choking, robotic arms and enough inappropriate overtures and blatant harassment to keep HR busy for years.

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"It's a *little* dirty," concedes Reed, a vast understatement for a show that can still make your jaw drop in the post-"**South Park**" world we live in. But FX has not been nearly as unnerved as you might expect.

"They're surprisingly cool," Reed says. "The notes that we get back are few and far between. And when there are [notes] you can totally see their point. Usually the ones I remember [from past projects] are eye-rollers, but I haven't really had that with FX. Usually it's, 'Yeah, sorry. I should never have written that.'"

The road through Season 1 was rocky, with a big premiere and then a slow slide in the ratings, even as the network asked for more episodes and quotes like "Seriously, call **Kenny Loggins**, cause you're in the danger zone" gained traction online.



"Archer" (FX)

"FX was very cool during the whole thing," says Reed, who is based in Atlanta, where the entire series is made and animated. "They said, 'Don't worry. It's a marathon, not a sprint. About midseason, they said, 'We do hope however that we've found the floor.' Then, for whatever reason — word of mouth — it ticked back up and just cleared the bar for a second season. We had 10 weeks to chew our fingernails down to the quick."

After just a few weeks off, they launched into production of Season 2. "I am writing number 11," Reed says. "They ordered 13. We are recording Episode 10 starting tomorrow. Episode 9 is being storyboarded ... well, storyboards being placed against the audio. There's a lot of overlap. I just went to the mix for No. 7 on Friday. And No. 8 is somewhere getting animated, I guess. It's hard for me to keep track. I always have to be reminded of what episode we're talking about. We have a staff of about 40 very talented young animators in a great big studio in the woods. I'm looking at them right now, hunched over their tablets drawing furiously."

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Reed got his start at **Turner Networks**, where he met his collaborator and Archer's executive producer, **Matt Thompson**. They were in charge of the library and used to take old cartoons home, drink beer and watch episodes of TV shows people hadn't seen since the 1960s. "First day on the job, I walked in fresh-faced and eager to work, I met [Matt] and he said, 'Come on, we're getting out of this place. I'll tell you the ins and outs so you don't have to work too hard.'"

So suddenly a kid who rarely read comics or watched cartoons but spent most of his childhood dreaming of becoming a private eye like on "**Simon & Simon**" or "**Magnum P.I.**" found himself in the world of cartoons. That led to their "**What's Up, Tiger Lily**"-like spin on the old cartoon "Sealab 2021," "Frisky Dingo" and now "Archer."

Reed is coy about Season 2 but offers up these tidbits: somebody at ISIS has fathered an illegitimate baby, Archer and Lana go on missions to Gstaad and Louisiana, Archer's manservant **Woodhouse** gets an origin story episode, and late in the season Archer gets a love interest. And you can expect catty comments from co-workers like **Pam**, the dumpy HR manager who wants to sleep with anyone and everyone, or **Gillette**, the sassy gay worker who gets on like gangbusters with Lana but can't stand Archer.

Reed created the role of Gillette just so he could get back to performing.

"I did the voice of the hero and the villain in 'Frisky Dingo,'" says Reed. "I missed not getting in the booth and goofing around and subsequently getting paid for it. So I essentially wrote Gillette into the scripts. My girlfriend gets unnerved when she watches the cuts of me doing Gillette. She says, 'That sounds really authentic. Go grill something.'"

— Michael Giltz

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This series is hilarious! I've watched Season 1 twice since I got the DVDs.

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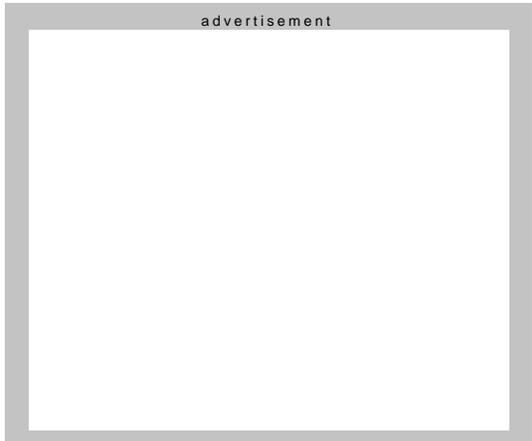
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Geoff Boucher always wanted to be a mild-mannered reporter working for a major metropolitan newspaper ... or maybe a wookiee. He came to The Times in 1991 and covered crime, politics and music before becoming the paper's go-to geek. His legion of super contributors include Dawn Chmielewski, Ben Fritz, Lisa Fung, John Horn, Susan King, Chris Lee, Gina McIntyre, Jevon Phillips, Scott Sandell, and Steve Zeitchik.

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