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John Ziffren

**“Better, cheaper,
faster’ isn’t a joke.
It’s a mandate.”**

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Dawn breaks for Wyck Godfrey
When Sam Goldwyn met Coco Chanel
Honoring this year’s Digital 25

John Ziffren



John Ziffren (center) on the set of ABC Family's *Switched at Birth*, with script supervisor Elisa Forni (left) and fellow executive producer Paul Stupin (right).

Every Guild needs a secret weapon. The Producers Guild's is John Ziffren.

You will not find his name among the officers or National Board members listed in the masthead of this magazine. He does not appear in the Guild's published list of committee chairs. But Ziffren's fingerprints — no matter how hard he tries to erase them — can be found on many of the PGA's major initiatives and programs over the past 10 years. From the renovation and vision of the PGA website, to the Guild's Awards categories for television, to its long-term strategies for collective action and fundraising, his impact has been consistent, profound and — at his own request — rarely acknowledged. At this very moment, he is likely on set, wincing in pain at the thought of you reading this interview.

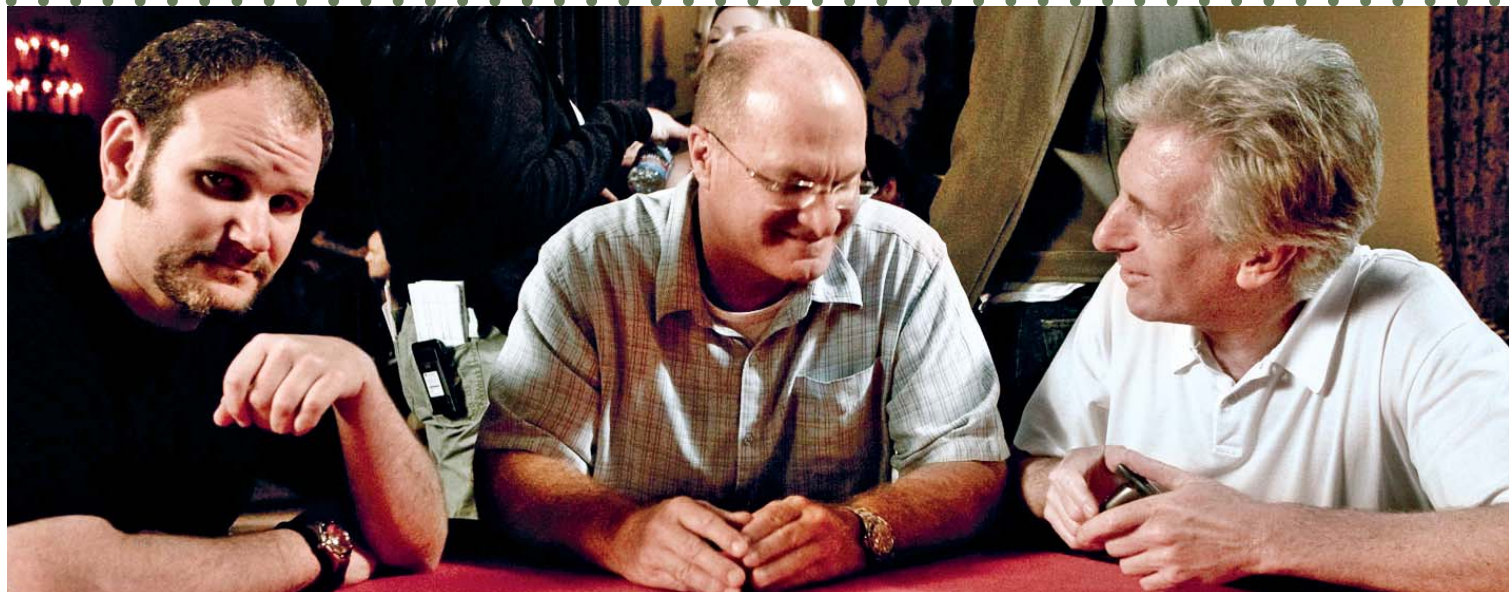
Even if Ziffren is not in pain right now, he's almost certainly on set. After more than 30 years in the industry and almost a thousand hours of primetime programming, he's earned a reputation as one of the finest producers of television working today, with a roster of involvements that includes everything from certified classics such as *The Larry Sanders Show* and *The Golden Girls*, to cult hits like *NewsRadio* and *Parker Lewis Can't Lose* and the new hit series *Switched at Birth*. His professional path has

taken him from the legendary Spelling/Goldberg Productions to the heyday of Brillstein-Grey Entertainment, to the Web entertainment company Z.com. Throughout these stops, he's demonstrated equal skill in assembling cohesive production units, as well as the day-to-day responsibilities of producing a series.

For the last four years, Ziffren has executive-produced pilots and series for ABC Family, where this fall he is overseeing four of the network's original series: *Switched at Birth*, *Make It or Break It*, *Jane By Design* and *Melissa & Joey* as well as their four pilots: *Bunheads*, *Intercept*, *Baby Daddy* and *Village People*. In the few spare moments that schedule allows, he can be found offering his expertise and perspective not only to the PGA, but the Television Academy and LA84 Foundation.

This is the 52nd in *Produced by's* ongoing series of Case Studies of successful producers and their work. After considerable begging, editor Chris Green was invited to sit down with Ziffren in his offices at ProdCo, on the CBS Radford lot, for a discussion that included such topics as the increased need for communication in a vertically integrated network environment, the vitality of the PGA's Produced By Conference, and how roller-blading skills can prove to be an invaluable production asset.

Photos by Michael Q. Martin (except where indicated)



(From left) Creator/executive producer Javier Grillo-Marxuach, producer John Pare and Ziffren on the set of ABC Family's *The Middleman*. (Photo: Ralph King)

No one's born a producer. So, how did you find your way into the job?

When I was a kid, my uncle took me on set of the television series *Batman*. And I was just blown away. So as I was growing up, when I would see a TV show or movie shooting, I stopped and watched for hours. I was really fascinated by it. I got a job at my local movie theater when I was a teenager; it was one of those places where I would sell tickets, move down the counter, sell popcorn, go upstairs, run the movie. After people left, I would clean the theater, and I would run the movies for myself as I was sweeping up. I really, really loved it.

Are there any films from that time that you remember seeing on the job?

I remember the week we had *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds*. The theatre had just gotten one of the first platter systems in the country, so you didn't have to change over from projector to projector but rather you built the entire night on one big platter. The problem with the system was that it didn't come with an instruction manual. I broke that film in about six places while it was running, and when I was putting it back onto shipping reels the entire film dumped on the floor [laughs]. When I went to college, I went to USC. They had a great film school but it was pretty

We couldn't afford steadicams, but fortunately Peter knew how to roller blade. And so the dolly grip would just grab him by the belt and drag him around.

clear by then that I had no real creative talents. I couldn't act. I couldn't direct. I couldn't write. But I loved technology, production and organization. And I'd been on some sets that were shot on videotape, and I thought hey, this videotape thing is really good. This is the future. So I went to school — this was in the mid-'70s — I entered as an electrical engineering major, figuring if I could know everything there was to know about videotape, I could help adapt it to this industry and have some

sort of value in the business. About a year and a half of being an engineering major convinced me that I should go straight into the film school. [laughs] That same summer I got a job as a PA for Leonard Goldberg, when he was at Spelling/Goldberg. At that time, their company produced almost a third of the ABC's prime-time schedule.

That's hard to conceive of, these days.

It was really extraordinary. But I said, I'll paint parking lots, I'll do whatever I can. I just want to be around production. And he was kind enough to give me a job in the summer. I had the time of my life going from set to set, from *Charlie's Angels* to *Starsky and Hutch* to *Family ...* all those classic shows. In the fall, I really wanted to continue working but also wanted my degree. The film school was really open to that, so I started working year-round at Spelling/Goldberg and going to school at night. I graduated with my degree in four years, and stayed at Spelling/Goldberg for ten. The thing that was so fabulous was that every show was so different. And the idea and challenge of having this group of people that gets a script one day, and then a week later, shoots it and figures out how to do it for the money, and delivers that script in the vision of the executive producers, it really became a fascination of mine. I've always been



Ziffren (left) with director of photography John Newby on the set of *The Middleman*. (Photo: Ralph King)

proud and passionate that if I'm performing that function, the credit that I take on the show is "Produced by." I feel very fortunate that being able to put together a team, participating in the entire production process and delivering a creative product is somehow thought of as work and has become a career for me. It is a dream come true. And I still love technology. The videotape thing actually worked out in ways that I hadn't anticipated.

So when you talk about that challenge of putting together those productions, who did you learn from? Who were your mentors there?

A place like Spelling/Goldberg in the '70s and '80s, with its independent production company model, before vertical integration, before the end of Fin-Syn,¹ was a fantastic learning ground. These guys were so brilliant in understanding their vision and knowing how to deliver it in their business model. They understood the creative. They understood communication. There was a consistency and commitment to a concept and a vision for the company. And that was true with many independent companies. Witt-Thomas-Harris, Stephen Cannell ... for so many of these guys, their leadership, brilliance and vision created these hallmark companies. Recently, while I've gone back and forth between producing

¹The Financial Interest and Syndication Rules (Fin-Syn) were regulations that prevented major broadcast networks from owning the programming that they aired in prime time. The Fin-Syn Rules were repealed in 1993.



Ziffren (left) with Paul Stupin on the *Switched at Birth* set.

So, how do you do that? I mean, everybody would love to draw the best people. How do you create that critical mass or gravitational pull?

As a producer, it's really your job to cast the production team. And one of the best ways of accomplishing that is to rely on your colleagues within the Guild. I think that is one of the greatest virtues of the Producers Guild; we have and are the world's greatest

knowledge base of media production. Our members collectively possess the full range of all those skills. If everything in having a successful shoot is about having a successful prep, having a successful prep is about having people there that really buy in and share your vision believe that they're needed, appreciated, valued, heard. We all face the same challenges, whether it's an Internet short for \$5,000 or a motion picture or television show for tens of millions of dollars. There's never enough money. There's never enough time. I'm fond of saying, as you know, that "better, cheaper, faster" isn't a joke; it's a mandate. But if the budget is cut in half, you can still find a way to shoot something. Fitting those pieces together is producing. One of the things that's so exciting right now is the chaos within the business models of television. I see it as an enormous opportunity. There are platforms for us as PGA members to create innovative strategies and systems to implement production across everything from motion pictures to mobile phones. The number of outlets has never been greater, and so the opportunity has never been greater. The challenge is, of course, that while there has never been enough money for a given show, now there's even less. Folks who get locked into



On the set of *Switched at Birth*, Ziffren discusses the production with observing director Rich Newey (left) and producer Shawn Wilt (center).

“that’s the way it’s always been done,” I think are going to have a much harder time than folks who can really emphasize a new way of working.

When you talk about putting the pieces together, especially given the state of relative chaos you describe, a lot of people may have a hard time wrapping their head around that challenge. Given a problem in physical production, most good producers can break that problem down to its constituent parts and solve it. But the obstacles you’re talking about are almost existential ones.

Primarily, it’s about understanding what the goal is. For instance, in the case of the company I’m at now, the clear mandate was to build a production unit that creates very high-quality programming at a price. This fall, I’m executive producing four series and four pilots, all very good shows with first-class production values and at a price point below that of our basic cable competition. The “win” is to have the showrunner feel that the final product beat the script and for the network, to have that product for one

dollar under budget, that’s a bull’s-eye. If you know what your mandates are, then it’s a matter of being a really good communicator and a really good listener, and having the political savvy to understand, at the end of the day, what the real goals are. Everyone works for someone; even network presidents work for someone. They establish the creative and financial goals. Being a good producer means being able to articulate and evangelize those goals to the entire team. If you’re an effective communicator and you know what your tools are and you have the right people and there’s a degree of trust and communication, you’re on your way, whether it’s putting together a show or a company.

Just to help a reader get a concrete sense of what you’re talking about, can you recall a time when you came to recognize the true deliverable was not what you had anticipated?

For *The Larry Sanders Show*, Garry Shandling had an extraordinarily clear view of exactly what he wanted. And Brad Grey had an extraor-

dinarly clear view, as Garry’s partner, of how to support that. It was very unusual that one person should have total autonomy, creatively, in terms of a show. So Garry wanted to have a show that looked like a movie, but was shot on a sitcom schedule. Since I worked in both multi- and single-camera production, I always believed that the number of cameras alone did not define how a show should look. If you have four cameras, it doesn’t have to mean a proscenium look. You can shoot a master and opposing coverage simultaneously if you have the right director and DP,

and if it serves the vision of the show. We had a production designer who built a great set that enabled cameras to get into adequate positions to get all the coverage we needed. We had directors that were able to work in a way that embraced simultaneous coverage. So we created a 360-degree environment that was essentially pre-lit from above. There were always three camera operators, six when we shot the talk show stuff. And every scene was ideally one setup; Peter Smokler was the DP, and he really embraced creating a different production strategy. He and his operators could get any shot, anywhere. There were a lot of pillars and doors to provide cover, so when someone walked past a camera operator, the guy would dive behind it. Peter himself operated a camera. We couldn’t afford steadicams, but fortunately Peter knew how to roller blade. And so the dolly grip would just grab him by the belt and drag him around. So, the look of the show was unique, but because there was such clarity in what we were trying to do, when we had accomplished it, we were able to shoot an entire sin-



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gle-camera half-hour show in two production days a week, including talk show segments where an audience would come in. One of the problems I think that's emerged in the years since Fin-Syn, which resulted in vertical integration, is that there are so many people involved in the creative process. Now, all of them are bright, and passionate, and care, and want to contribute — but when you have that many people involved in the creative process you're building a camel [i.e., an incoherent project designed by committee]. With the shows I'm currently producing for ABC Family, I'm fortunate to have a situation where, again, there's absolute clarity. I was brought in by Paul Lee and Kate Juergens, who have a very clear mandate for quality programming at a price. They had a very clear vision, as does their team, for



Ziffren talks things over with *Switched at Birth* cast member Lea Thompson.

exactly what they're looking for. So, it's much more akin to the old independent production company model. Decisions get made, and there is consistency. I think we all, as producers, go through the frustration of the "half-decision," or the decision that waits until the last minute.

As a producer in that situation where there is involvement from perhaps more people than is all together necessary — do you consider it your job to deliver the camel? Or is it to shape the camel into something more coherent?

Really, my job is to not let it get to that point. I have to make sure the right people have the right information at the right time to be able to make the right decision. So it is always about communication. When you have a lot of layers, it just requires more communication, more diligence, and more work in making sure that everyone has signed off. A producer's goal is always to make sure that the final, right message is delivered. Our job is to get to that answer.

You've talked about communication — that's been almost a constant

throughout virtually every interview this magazine has done, that emphasis on communication.

I think it's the core challenge, because it requires a degree of honesty about who you are as a person and producer, what your strengths and weaknesses are. The Guild has 4,800 members, and we're all crazy enough to think we actually want to be leaders. If you ask a lot of folks what they think they're strong at and then ask people who work for them what their strengths are, those answers are probably different in a lot of cases. I think that degree of personal candor is a challenge. We need to be honest about reading ourselves and reading others relative to these projects.

What can we do as a Guild to foster that, to help members develop their skills, whether, communication, self-scrutiny or otherwise?

I think the Guild's Produced By Conference is visionary in its ability to address this in terms of the diversity of programming and skills it embraces.

You can, in the course of a weekend, hear so many ideas about our business and see what new ideal really resonate with you. As PGA members, we're the leaders in figuring out how to create content for all these platforms, and to do so within a business and creative model. And that's an enormous challenge; it requires us to be very innovative, the entire membership. And that's the challenge and opportunity facing our Guild members in the industry right now: How can we be that innovative and adaptable?

We'd like to think the Guild is helping in that regard.

Jobs, benefits, and influence are, I think, the things that any member would hope the Guild could deliver. And if the Guild could deliver all three of those, then everyone in town would be a member, because they're very hard to deliver. But I remember vividly, because I was a member of an organization called the American Association of Producers, the AAP. There were a few visionary folks

involved with the AAP — Tim Gibbons, George Sunga, Jason Shubb, and others — and they led the decision to merge with the PGA. And it was a controversial decision. But these guys really understood the value and importance of being partners, being a community. Recently, The Producers Mark initiative is, I think, so visionary and potentially so valuable to the entire community. When you look at movie and it says "Starring," "Directed by," "Written by," it's very clear. The Producers Mark will help the audience and the industry understand who produced any given movie, and I think that will help our profession. Really, we all owe such a tremendous debt to Kathy Kennedy, Marshall Herskovitz, Hawk Koch and Mark Gordon, and Vance Van Petten for their leadership on this issue. Regarding jobs, obviously, if any of us had a magic wand, we'd have full employment. It's unfortunately the same challenge our entire country is facing. But if the Guild helps our members become more facile, more nimble, more innovative, then



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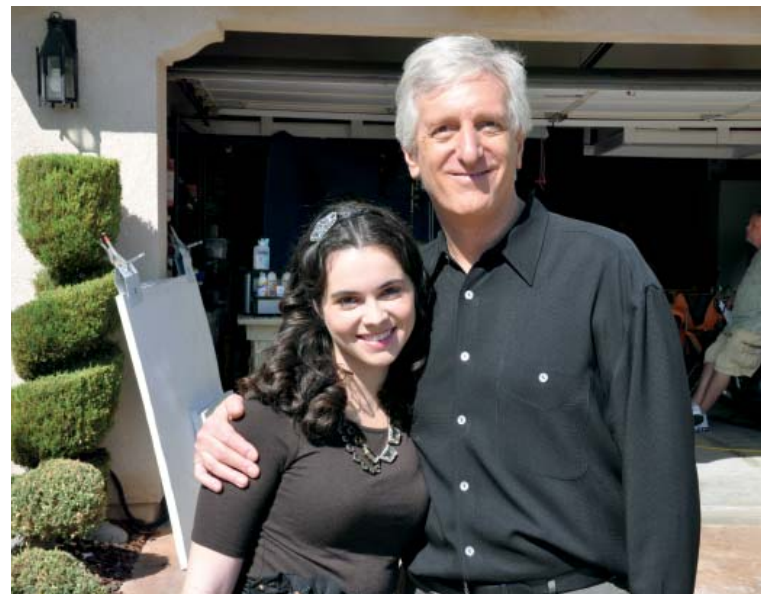
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we become the training ground for the producers of the next generation, for content across all media platforms. I think the potential is extraordinary, and I think the Producers Guild is in a unique position to be able to serve that mission. Benefits are obviously crucial and a very challenging thing that people far more informed than

I am working on. But at the end of the day you want to be able to make money and have you and your family taken care of. I think it's one of the reasons that it's so important that we get as many people involved with the Guild as possible because it will help our ability to provide better benefits to all of us. Now is the time that we have to double down. It's a twist on the John Kennedy quote. "Ask not what your Guild can do for you, but what you can do for your Guild," forgive the paraphrase. I think that's a hard lesson for all of us because we all want to be able simply to pay a membership fee and have that result in getting a job. We have to understand there's sweat equity involved with getting that job. Part of it is knowing who you are. Part of it is building the skill set. Part of it is learning about how the industry is growing and where the opportunities are that match your skill set and increasing that skill set. These are places where the Guild can make a difference in someone's career; you have to understand the resources of the Guild are limited, but the opportunity for the Guild to make a difference to all of us is limitless. In production, we all try to be disciplined and strategic. And I think that we all have to be similarly disciplined and focused, as well as willing to contribute our time and effort and insight into helping the Guild fully realize its potential, because if we do that, the Guild will serve us better.




Ziffren on the set with *Switched at Birth* cast member Vanessa Marano.

I think a lot of producers respond to that notion of the Guild itself as a production. We talked a little bit about bringing people onto your production team; how do you approach recruiting new members for the PGA team?

When I talk to people about being part of this group, a lot of it is about what their needs and desires are. Because frankly, if someone is interested being a Guild member because they want to learn how to program a website, that's probably a bad reason to join the Guild. If someone is interested in changing the industry, in networking and communicating with people who are going through similar challenges in today's economy, then that's a pretty easy pitch. So I think a lot of it is understanding what people are looking for and what will be helpful to their careers or their lives. Some people really enjoy participating in organizations that promote skill set and knowledge growth, and for this profession, there's no better place to do that than the PGA. Because there's no one else that can provide this for our profession. There's no other organization that serves the production community, from the visionary motion picture producers that find a project and somehow get it to screen, to the folks in new media who go out and shoot a webisode. I mean, no one else does that. It's also why I think our website has so much potential. Because I think if people were able to ask a question in a forum of profession-

als in our industry and know that within our membership, there is the answer to every single production question you could ever ask, that's an amazing benefit. If I'm presented with a challenge and I have no idea how to approach it, I'll call you guys, and say, "Who in the membership would be good with this, who knows about this?" And reach out to them to find out. That's why I think innovation and reflection and mentoring are key and one of the reasons that I am having

this conversation with you. It's because I really want to promote the idea that this is a time for the membership to actually work hard to help themselves and to think about how we can grow. I try every day to mine new ideas and new strategies to find a way to do things better. And just because you have an idea doesn't mean it's a good idea. But some of them are, and a lot of them come from my co-workers and people in the Guild who have done things in certain ways that can be applied to content creation today. We're always looking for how to solve the challenges better. Part of it is retraining ourselves. Part of it is retraining crew members. Part of it is technology. For a show where it's appropriate, technology can facilitate a better creative for a better price. On one of our series, I used that same *Larry Sanders* model of multiple simultaneous cameras in a pre-lit 360-degree environment, but added the capacity of camera platforms to be able to dump straight into the AVID so we didn't have to post-sync dailies at full res and output the online from the AVID. You have a technological platform that delivers a high-quality image with the capacity to follow that workflow through post. And that's a win. Change shouldn't be feared. Being able to share ideas with other people, and to have them build on those ideas, that's our responsibility. That's what makes the potential of the Guild so great. 

"The voyage of discovery is not seeking new landscapes but in having new eyes."

—MARCEL PROUST, AUTHOR

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