

Edith Ann tells it straight

By Suzanne Gill

"I do not make things up; that is lies. But the truth can be made up if you know how." So says 5-year-old Edith Ann Bewley.

There's a lot of truth in "Edith Ann — A Few Pieces of the Puzzle," airing Tuesday, Jan. 18, on ABC. It was made up by performer Lily Tomlin, who created Edith Ann more than 23 years ago; writer Jane Wagner, executive producer Gabor Csupo, founder of Emmy-winning animation house Klasky Csupo; producer Sherry Gunther; and director Tamara Varga. And it was set to music by Mark Mothersbaugh.

The precocious little girl with the upturned tongue and mischievous, half-circle eyes was originated by Tomlin before she joined "Rowan and Martin's Laugh-In" in 1970. She based Edith Ann on her own impetuous feelings, rather than any specific child.

"The only thing that I consciously derived from anyone was the speech impediment," Tomlin says. "Small children... sometimes their tongue is too big for their mouth. And their tongue will protrude on a t-h, and so they kind of blow a soft raspberry. They say, 'Ned takes a baththith' or 'Aunt Ruththith.' So when I pitched

the character to 'Laugh-In' in the fall of '70, I told (series producer) George Schlatter, 'I want to use this speech impediment.' So he coined 'And that's the truth.'"

Such was the success of Tomlin's Edith Ann, sitting in an oversized rocker with chocolate smeared on her face and a conspiratorial smile on her lips, that for years that line was part of the vernacular. But Tomlin wanted to give Edith Ann a life of her own — and to get her out of that rocker.

Reluctant to put Edith on the Saturday-morning treadmill, Tomlin finally struck a deal with ABC for two prime-time specials and a possible series. The success of another Klasky Csupo production, "The Simpsons," had each of the rival networks looking for an animated series with broad appeal. In the last four years, no network but Fox has been able to sustain such an effort.

At first, Tomlin and Wagner wanted to animate Edith Ann in clay because they wanted her to seem three-dimensional, not flat. They began to build sets, but realized the project would be too costly and technically difficult, Klasky Csupo's Varga suggested a

collage animation technique that combines photographic images with drawings. Watch the sky, the kitchen cabinets and even the milk cartons in "Edith Ann": The collage is in almost every scene. Producer Gunther is pleased with the result.

"I think it makes it unique in a sense because this technique has only been used in commercials — a cereal box with some animation around it — but it had never been done in a half-hour show. Even more importantly it brings some sense of reality to the Edith Ann universe, which we really were looking for."

Edith's world is full of contemporary reality. In "A Few Pieces," her dad has lost his job, and she tells a neighbor that her dog, Buster, was killed in a drive-by shooting. (Everyone connected with the show hastens to add that this may be Edith Ann "making up the truth.") In the second special, due to air this spring, she loses her latchkey and is locked out of her house; she meets a bag lady, and they spend a homeless afternoon together.

A coffee drinker, diarist and keen observer, Edith Ann is still full of childish insecurities. She takes these to the school psychologist — "the feelings doctor," as Tomlin calls her — and finds a renewed sense of self-worth, which in turn allows her to make up with her castoff friends and even tolerate her baby brother, Vic.

The show, Tomlin says, "is a forum for that kind of exploration, rather than just something presentational with one gag after another or some kind of story line that's entertaining but maybe doesn't resonate any further."

Most series pilots stagnate under the weight of their own ambition; "Edith Ann" achieves Tomlin's hoped-for resonance and establishes Edith Ann's world with considerable grace. The half-hour is rich with verbal and visual nuance and worthy of more than one viewing.

"It was definitely a big challenge," Csupo says, "because Lily and Jane had very specific visions and created this character over 20 years ago. To bring her to life in a different form was a big challenge, but we found that it brought some great opportunities to make a new, modern version of a well-known character."

"I tried not to do a retro kind of show," director Varga adds.

With "A Few Pieces of the Puzzle," Edith Ann should be the girl of the hour. And, well, that's the truth.

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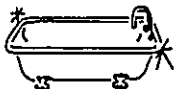
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