

# There once was a boy named Figaro Pho

*We all have fears. Some of them rational, some of them... not so rational. Profile writer Lee Suckling does his first ever interview with 'real life animation character' Figaro Pho – Harbourview's new phobic friend.*



**T**here once was a boy named Figaro Pho. He grew up in a land that not many will know. He gives himself frights, despite his best might, and now he has landed a show.

Figaro Pho, charming and tragic, has an alphabet of phobias. From the traditional fears of spiders and snakes to the weird and wacky – Figaro is scared of just about everything. Including bodily odours and, we're not kidding, poo.

Throughout 2009 and 2010, 26 episodes Figaro's life were produced by the ABC (each of the 90-second shorts is available at <http://www.youtube.com/show/figaropho>), and this year, Figaro Pho is set to become a full half-hour show, with 13 episodes commissioned as *The Adventures of Figaro Pho*.

Figaro Pho's show has gained international acclaim from its target market of youngsters, plus adults and the animation industry alike. It's a series without dialogue, instead focusing on Figaro as a person; his expressions, his reactions, and the endearing vocal exclamations of horror he makes.

If he had any friends, Figaro's personable nature would make him infectious. Unfortunately, he doesn't have a single human soul in his life, because, of course, he's scared of other people. He does have a dog, though.

Figaro has had an interesting life. He won't reveal exactly where he was born from except to say, "I was delivered by mail". "[That] explains my acute claustrophobia," he says, noting one of his many, many fears. "I do however like to believe that I was ushered into the world painlessly to the tune of Beethoven's *Moonlight Sonata* upon a velvet pillow."

While he's not sure where his phobias began, Figaro doubts there has ever been a moment he's been without worry. "The thought of a time that I was not afraid scares me senseless," he says. "I do however have strong recollections of being afraid of my umbilical chord whilst in the womb."

Figaro's hallway is filled with portraits of relatives who "met a terrible fate", such as his aunt Hilda, who was blown away by a gust of wind (hence Figaro's Anemophobia), and his uncle Fredrick who was chased into a mangrove by a flock of rabid geese (responsible for his ornithophobia).

Life is a daily struggle for Figaro. "Every day I have a new 'biggest' phobia," he says. "Today I have no greater fear than the fear of sucking on a mint candy whilst wearing a prickly woollen sweater," he explains further. "I also cringe a little at the words 'candy' and 'sweater!'"

"New phobias develop every day and every night. For instance, last night I was eating peanut butter and was terrified that it had adhered completely to the roof of my mouth. I will no longer eat peanut butter at night."

Figaro isn't the only one with such phobias, though. "I once met a caterpillar that was so frightened of its own reflection that it metamorphosed into a butterfly in a matter of seconds."

"Your newest phobia?" I ask Figaro. "The fear of answering questions," he replies sheepishly.

Only one of Figaro's fears strike him as ridiculous. "I do giggle a little, at my completely irrational fear of being shot out of a canon," he says. Aside from that, Figaro is perplexed as to why the rest of us aren't so afraid of everything in the world around us. In fact, he thinks we're all a bit naïve.

"I am deeply concerned about the Girl Guide who occasionally attempts to sell me her chocolate chip cookies," he quips. "According to my research, it is highly probably that traces of a spider's leg, a cockroach wing or a rat whisker are contained in each chocolate chip. A thought to horrible to bare."

One is left wondering, is Figaro's head constantly full of phobias, or does he get over them one by one? "I firmly believe in confronting fears and phobias," he says, "And yes, of course" he gets over them. "I love the film *Patch Adams* where the philosophy of curing sickness is to use humour. I like to take a *Patch Adams* approach to my phobias and fears." Such explains, perhaps, why he's happy having cameras follow him everywhere for his show.

Increased awareness of phobias and the development of tools to overcome them are "noble pursuits", Figaro explains. This is the key reason Figaro Pho is on television. "I have immense admiration for people who overcome their fears by laughter or by courageous confrontation. I know I find it most difficult at the best of times.

"There is no better feeling to chip away at fear. One day I will pop a mint into my mouth whilst sporting a prickly woolly sweater and smile."

The feedback elicited from Figaro Pho, the show, is by and large positive. "Sometimes people are a little grossed out by some of the things that exist in my world. I am terrified of poo for instance ... not many people like to see poo on TV.

"However most people, I believe, love my show. It has won lots of awards, which terrifies me - many of the trophies are quite sharp and pointy."

Figaro's awards include 2010 Kidscreen awards; Best Animated Series for Family, Best Animation and Best Direction as well as 2009

AFI Awards for Best Children's Television Animation and Best Creative Excellence. Also on Figaro's mantle are two 2009 ATOM Awards for Best Animation (*Figaro Pho - Fear of poo*) and Best Interactive/ Video Game (*Figaro Pho* website). And let's not forget that 2009 Logie nomination, for the TV Week Excellence in Children's Television award.

"I'm watched by EVERYONE," Figaro says, when queried on his target market. "But I've been told that 8-12 year olds are the main attraction."

With 26 short episodes made, Figaro is now the subject of the new half-hour show, once again produced by the ABC. "How are you dealing with all this success?" I probe Figaro.

"Ah, what is success? No one likes a big head, and believe me, my head is already incredibly bulbous," he says. "So to have a big head mentally and emotionally on top of a physically gigantic cranium would be wrong.

"I share the success of my show with my closest companion, Rivet - my mechanical dog - by sipping cups of green tea next to the fireplace."

"Green drinks and open fires don't frighten you?" I ask suspiciously.

Figaro pauses uncomfortably.

"Um, I hadn't considered the underlying dangers of such a banal ritual. I will proceed with caution ... I appreciate the heads up."

A whole bunch of new phobias will be explored and confronted in the new half-hour show. "There will a plethora of fears revealed, such as aliens, rivals (damn that muscular cousin of mine), baths, vampires, aliens, chickens, cactuses, a staring duck and many, many others," Figaro says.

*The Adventures of Figaro Pho* will appear on the ABC later this year. The new series is supported by the SAFC, Screen Australia and Screen New South Wales.

Thanks to Figaro Pho, aka creator Luke Jurevicius, for participating in Harbourview's interview. We know doing so was very, very scary for him and we applaud his courage. ■

