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Local ad man's TV brainstorm

Robin Williams stars on new sitcom devised by Leo Burnett exec in Chicago



LORI RACKL

The new CBS comedy "The Crazy Ones" is set at a fictional ad agency in Chicago, but it's an actual Chicago ad man who got the show — marking Robin Williams' return to series television — off the ground.

Leo Burnett executive creative director John Montgomery, who lives in Northbrook with his wife and three kids, is the driving force behind the fall series.

"We wouldn't be here but for him," creator David E. Kelley ("Harry's Law," "Ally McBeal") said of Montgomery, who brought the idea to Kelley seven years ago. "He's in the room with the writers three or four days a week, pitching real stories, sometimes crazier than we could even imagine. He knows that world. He understands the comedy of the process."

"The Crazy Ones" is a "profoundly amplified" version of the original idea, Montgomery said at a CBS party held as part of the TV critics' summer press tour in July.

Williams stars as an offbeat, larger-than-life advertising guru who runs an agency alongside his straitlaced daughter, played by Sarah Michelle Gellar ("Buffy the Vampire Slayer"). The firm handles blue-chip accounts such as McDonald's, a real-life Burnett client. The Oak Brook-based fast-food giant is featured heavily in the pilot, in which Williams and Gellar try to convince pop singer Kelly Clarkson to sing a jingle for the company.

While the cutthroat world of advertising plays a big role in "The Crazy Ones," it isn't necessarily the focus of the series, debuting

Sept. 26 as part of CBS' Thursday comedy block. It's the "Odd Couple-like" parent-child relationship between Williams and Gellar that's at the heart of the show. That dynamic was Kelley's idea.

"It's kind of a dream come true," Montgomery said about seeing his idea finally come to fruition. "It's been a long process."

He isn't the first Leo Burnett exec to inspire television. It's been reported that "Mad Men" protagonist Don Draper is loosely based on the agency's legendary creative head Draper Daniels.

Montgomery serves as the comedy's co-executive producer, along with director Jason Winer, a Northwestern alum who trained at iO. With 33 years under his belt at Leo Burnett, Montgomery has produced and directed hundreds of commercial campaigns.

He recently took Williams on a tour of the Leo Burnett headquarters to get the Chicago-born comedian acquainted with the business.

"I smuggled him into work and he absorbed bits and pieces of it," said Montgomery, who's stripped his Chicago office of Clio awards and various props to use on "The Crazy Ones" set in Los Angeles, where the series is filmed.

Williams, who said he enjoyed his tour of "The Death Star," feels that there's plenty of humorous material to mine from Montgomery's real-world experience.

"He's got miles and miles of stories," said Williams, who spent his early childhood in Lake Bluff and Lake Forest. "There was a Cheez-It-like product and the client told him, 'Please don't make our product look like a sphincter.' I just thought, 'If I can say that on any TV show ...'"

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HITS CLOSE TO HOME

Robin Williams stars as an advertising agency executive on CBS's new comedy "The Crazy Ones." The series is inspired by Northbrook's John Montgomery (inset), an executive creator director at Leo Burnett Company.

