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For One Actor, No More Chicken Parts A Seinfeldian Threesome: KFC, PETA and 'George'

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Actor Jason **Alexander** became famous as the amoral, self-centered character George Costanza of the "Seinfeld" show. But now he's in the middle of a battle between animal rights activists and the makers of Kentucky Fried Chicken over whether or not he lost his job as the ubiquitous KFC pitchman because of a soft spot in his heart for, well, chickens.

The complete story of how and why **Alexander's** lucrative KFC contract was terminated last month remains obscured, since the actor and the company will only discuss it in general terms and by press release. They insist that the parting was amicable.

But People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals (**PETA**) insists otherwise. **Alexander**, representatives say, became concerned about how those billions of KFC chickens are raised and slaughtered, and either got the boot as a result or parted ways because KFC wouldn't commit to making certain changes.

Precisely the kind of trouble that George always knew is in store for anyone who tries to do good. The whole episode began like this:

For several years now, **PETA** has campaigned against KFC and the way that it allows chickens to be raised. The birds, which **PETA** claims are in some ways more intelligent than cats and dogs, are raised in enormous factory farms, and are usually jammed into dark barns where they can barely move. To many animal rights activists, the treatment of the nation's 9 billion chickens is among the most egregious examples of the cruelty inherent in industrial livestock farming.

This spring, **PETA** decided to go after **Alexander** as part of its campaign to target high-profile executives and company representatives. The actor was about to begin appearing in a Los Angeles production of "The Producers" and, after several unanswered letters to his office asking to meet, **PETA** made clear it would picket the show and accuse **Alexander** of pitching for a cruel company.

The threat got **Alexander's** attention, says **PETA**, and he immediately made time for the group's president, Ingrid Newkirk. As she tells it, she flew out to Los Angeles this spring after **Alexander** invited her, and they spent several hours together, even though the actor didn't feel well and could barely speak.

Newkirk says **Alexander** listened intently and asked questions as she explained the way the chickens are raised -- jammed together into barns that stink from ammonia and droppings. She told how some birds are thrown alive into scalding water to kill them and how some get their heads smashed against walls. She even had hidden-camera video. Newkirk asked **Alexander** to support the eight-point program **PETA** had developed to improve conditions.

"He said that he wanted to work for an ethical company and that the information we presented was troubling to him," she says. "He called the company's president for us and helped set up a meeting. I believe he was advocating for us and even told me later 'I am an ally.'"

According to Newkirk, Cheryl Bachelder, president of KFC, quickly set up a meeting after the call from **Alexander**. (Another factor that may have played a role: **PETA** also had informed the well-heeled neighbors of Bachelder and of David Novak, CEO of KFC's parent company, Yum! Brands, in suburban Louisville, that it would bring a truck with two large TV screens to the area to show its version of how KFC chickens are treated.) Newkirk says that meeting between **PETA** and Bachelder resulted in an agreement by KFC to adopt new humane treatment guidelines, and was considered quite a coup by **PETA**.

But KFC spokeswoman Bonnie Warschauer says that while the company did agree to new humane treatment guidelines in May, it was in the works for some time and **PETA** had nothing to do with it. "We're leaders in this field and are proud of it," she says. Meanwhile, **Alexander's** contract with KFC was being renegotiated for another six months and his lawyer says the actor expected to continue with the company. KFC sales had jumped after **Alexander** joined its ad campaign in 2001 and, although sales had recently slipped, the ads were still well regarded. In fact, two had been voted among the top

20 ads of 2002 by a top advertising industry newspaper. In late May, **Alexander's** lawyer, Michael Gendler, told Advertising Age, "It's basically done, not literally signed, but it's done. Additional terms were built in and I fully anticipate going the distance."

But then late last month came reports that **Alexander** was not being renewed. In the words of Warschauer, KFC was "going for a new creative."

The actor and the company said their parting was amicable, and **Alexander** released a statement saying that "I have done commercials since I was a child and fully understand that two years is an enormous success for an on-air representative and a company. KFC has been a wonderful company with which to work." He made no mention of any disenchantment with KFC or the way its suppliers treat chickens.

But in true Seinfeldian fashion, the drama continued. KFC wants to let it all drop, but the **PETA** people are convinced that **Alexander** either fell on his sword for the birds or got fired because he stood up for chicken rights. (That statement of his, they said, was a classic non-denial denial.)

Newkirk reports that **Alexander** called her office before his contract ended and asked for the names of the KFC experts on humane treatment of birds. "If **Alexander** is what he appears to be, he is a decent and concerned person," she says. The company disputes this version of events entirely, with Warschauer saying last week that **PETA** and animal welfare "played absolutely no role" in the decision to end the collaboration. "Nothing could be further from the truth," she says. To support her view, Warschauer reported that **Alexander** made a final KFC commercial late last month with golf star Annika Sorenstam in Atlantic City, and that everyone had a great time. "With regard to Jason," Warschauer says, "we had a great run with him, and everyone is still friends."

As for **Alexander**, his people in Los Angeles are keeping their counsel, unwilling to discuss whether their man is a hero with principles or just an actor who lost an advertising gig. "We will send you the statement," the secretary to his agent said, and forwarded his remarks. "There's nothing more to say."

So **Alexander** is trying to leave on a high note. But as George famously learned when he worked for Kruger Abrasives and tried to leave everyone laughing, that's not an easy thing to do. And in this case, especially not easy because the battle between **PETA** and KFC looks like it will be heating up soon.

"KFC is lying" about its animal rights record, says Bruce Friedrich, head of **PETA's** campaign against the company. "We will be taking all available options to stop them from deceiving people about the horrible abuse of animals they are supporting."

As for KFC, the company recently accused **PETA** of "corporate terrorism" after pro-**PETA** animal rights activist doused their CEO with fake blood in Europe.

A whole lot of intensity about something that most people don't really think much about, and Jason **Alexander** is in the middle of it. Sound familiar?