

*Sesame Street is on its 45th year:
Let's discover the secret to its
success.*

SECRETS FROM SESAME STREET'S PIONEERS: How They Produced a Successful Television Series

by Dr. Lucille Burbank

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**SECRETS FROM
SESAME STREET'S
PIONEERS**

How They Produced a
Successful Television Series

SECOND EDITION

Dr. Lucille Burbank

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Prologue

When Carroll Spinney, who plays Big Bird and Oscar the Grouch on the hit-show *Sesame Street*, called me to arrange a meeting time, he wasn't aware (and I assumed he was) that the day he decided to meet me for an interview was Good Friday. Because Spinney was planning to get some much-needed work done at the Sesame Workshop headquarters in New York City before our interview, we agreed to meet late in the afternoon at a nearby restaurant. I arrived, as scheduled, and rushed over to him. He looked up at me, and I felt something was wrong. It turned out, due to Good Friday, the Workshop offices were closed, and so Spinney had been waiting for me with nothing to do since early in the morning until 4 p.m.! What do you say to such graciousness? He chose to wait and not reschedule. To this day, I am still marveling at his compassionate and generous nature.

Did you know that in the early days of *Sesame Street* Spinney was about to quit his job? In fact, when he decided to quit he was just a stairway away from his boss' office. Then suddenly, Kermit Love, caretaker of the Bird puppet, saw him pass briskly by and hailed Spinney to come in and look at his "new and improved" Big Bird costume. After Love and Spinney talked, Love convinced him to work at *Sesame Street* a bit longer. And that was the beginning of 45 years worth playing Big Bird and Oscar the Grouch! (Spinney, 2003).

Additionally, do you know that Spinney worked for Jim Henson? Indeed, Henson was the one responsible for hiring him. And do you know how Oscar the Grouch got his voice? I found out firsthand during our interview in front of a delightful fire in a private dining room. Spinney said he was "right down to the wire," going to his first audition for Oscar and he still didn't have Oscar's voice. "I get in a cab to go across town to meet Jim [Henson] at *Sesame Street*, and the cab driver pulls up and says, 'Where to Mac?' He's chewing on a cigar, talking on one side of his mouth and starts telling me about this Mayor Lindsay who 'is wrecking the city.' And he's going on like this, and I'm saying to myself, 'Wow, what a great voice!' And I keep saying to myself, 'Where to Mac? Where to Mac?'"

In suspense, I asked, “What happened next?”

Spinney told me he was at the audition and Henson said, “How do you want to do this?”

Spinney suggested, “Why don’t I put Oscar inside of the trash can, and you knock on the can.”

“Knock...knock...knock”

“Oscar pops up and in that cabby’s voice I grumble, ‘Get away from my trash can!’”

Henson said, “Perfect! That will do just fine.”

In addition to learning how a character’s voice can be developed, I also learned that Henson always studied voices. “One time, I was with him,” remembered Spinney, “when he picked up a voice from a waiter in New Orleans.” In order to emulate that voice Henson, too, latched on to a key phrase.

Then Spinney told me how Henson hired him: He was at a puppeteer convention putting on a show that had taken him a year to create. The show included film, animation (Spinney studied Norman McLaren of the Canadian Film Board), and unusual puppets (including “Picklepuss,” who was supposed to live in a trashcan, but it was never built).

“[At the convention] everything went wrong with my show,” recalled Spinney. “However, I ad-libbed so many things in my frustration —fortunately with frustrated humor— Jim [Henson] liked it.” Backstage I was very upset that he should see such a disaster. I was feeling very low when Jim came, shook my hand, and said, ‘I like what you were trying to do. I’ve had things go wrong like that myself.’” After which Spinney said he was sitting in the lounge, and Henson sat down on the couch, and Spinney’s three-and-a-half-year-old daughter, Jessie, climbed up on his lap. Henson said to me, “Would you like to come to New York and talk about the puppets?”

Spinney immediately asked, “What do you mean talk about the puppets? Talk shop?”

“No, talk about working for me,” replied Henson.

Being the puppeteer for Big Bird isn’t easy. More often than not the general public looks at a show or a character on television and thinks, *I can do that; what’s the big deal!* So, low and behold, at a

party a guy comes up to Spinney and says in a robust voice, “I can do it for an hour!” Meaning, he can play Big Bird for at least an hour.

Big Bird’s head weighs about four-and-a-half pounds and in order to manipulate the eyelids and beak, Spinney has to hold up an outstretched arm in a vertical position and insert his hand into Big Bird’s head. He must keep it there —up as straight as possible— for as long as Big Bird is on the show and it can be awhile. “All right,” Spinney said to the guy, “Hold up your arm vertically for five minutes; you don’t even have to put anything in your hand.” There was a clock on the mantel and a couple of minutes went by when the fellow embarrassingly put his hand down.

“There’s a rule in puppetry; if it’s comfortable, you’re probably doing it wrong,” Spinney laughed. “My arm has gotten much stronger than it was when I started. I’m really great at painting ceilings!”

Chapter 4

Jim Henson's Muppets

Reflecting on Sesame Street's success, Dave Connell, executive producer, said, "My answer would be because it is a good television show, but is it good just because of the Muppets? No. The Muppets are important. The Muppets are the stars, and we designed this show not to have any star and it did."

Although Joan Cooney, co-founder of *Sesame Street*, had called for puppets in her proposal, it is interesting to note that in the planning stage of *Sesame Street* there were those who weren't sure about using them. Finally, after some discussion, Jim Henson was invited to present his puppets, which he copyrighted as Muppets. Upon seeing Henson's creative display, "Connell, Gibbon, and Stone all guessed that the variety, charm and vitality of these Muppets would provide the writers with a wide field for their imaginations. In addition, some...of the Muppet characters...seemed to have great potential for presenting educational content in an entertaining manner" (Lesser, 1974, p. 38).

As we all know, Connell, Gibbon, and Stone, the producers, were more than right when they guessed the Muppets would work. Not only did they work, but also as Dave Connell said they became the star.

In my interview with Connell, I asked him the value of puppets, and he said, "Puppets are sort of two dimensional in a sense, and you can make them cartoonish, if you will. There are many characters you want to portray on the show, but you have to be careful how you do that, and puppets allow you that freedom. [For example], you can have a character like Cookie Monster who would sell his soul to the devil for a cookie. You can't do that with a human being, especially on a show like *Sesame Street* where you want positive role models. You can have these really strange kinds of characters, and [behavior like that is] acceptable, and you can't do that with people."

Intrigued by Connell's explanation about the functionality of puppets, I decided to ask Sam Gibbon the same question: "What is the value of puppets?" To which he simply replied, "Kids love them." Then Gibbon added, "Puppets express emotions or relationships in a heightened and 'crystallized' manner that is non-threatening to the child viewer." Gibbon also believed puppets can provide strong modeling elements for children. For example, he suggested, "Big Bird embodies many aspects of childhood, and some modeling is more successful with the puppets as opposed to either a child actor or [adults]."

Fascinated by the use of Henson's puppets, I asked Jon Stone why he believed in their lasting impact on *Sesame Street*. "Well, we knew that to begin with, from our early research, that children love puppets. I love the possibility of puppets. They can do things that human beings simply can't do. For one thing you can get quite violent with puppets, and it doesn't hurt anybody. And I think violence —channeled violence— is perfectly all right in a children's show. It's part of life, and I am not talking, you know, machine guns or car chases or anything like that. But one puppet can really mash another one, and it just bounces right back again like a cartoon. They are, in many ways, much more versatile than people for those reasons and others."

Stone continued, "Puppets don't have to be humanoid or even monsteroid as Grover and Cookie Monster are monsteroids, and Ernie and Bert are sort of little humanoids. But we have talking loaves of bread and abstract fuzz balls that kind of bounce around and things like that [and] they're just wonderful things to work with. Puppets seem to be an excellent vehicle for bringing abstract things to life in a way that is meaningful to children. It's just practically limitless! It's limited only by your imagination what you can do with puppets that you simply cannot do with real people."

In David Borgenicht's book *Sesame Street Unpaved* (Children's Television Workshop, 1998), there is a chapter titled, "The Anything Muppets," which beautifully illustrates Stone's comment about puppets being limited only by your imagination. Some of the Anything Muppets shown are Slimy the Worm, Barkley the Dog, the Twiddlebugs, The Honkers and the Dingers, plus Baby Bear. Also,

talking vegetables are featured along with Gladys the Cow, and Roosevelt Franklin, a young purple Anything Muppet who attends Roosevelt Franklin Elementary School.

Upon seeing Roosevelt Franklin, I am immediately reminded of my interview with Matt Robinson. Robinson, who was a producer and not an actor in the early days of *Sesame Street*, was asked to play Gordon until a suitable actor could be found. During this time he was also the voice of Roosevelt Franklin. In my interview with him, I asked his opinion about using the Muppets. Robinson answered my question by talking about what he called “a very unique method” of actors and Muppets on the Street together:

“There was a very unique method used where they integrated the Muppets with the live people so you’d talk to them just like they were people. It gave a particular aura to the show that really couldn’t be matched. I remember when I first learned how to work with the Muppets you had to forget that they were puppets and just use them as people. It was fascinating because you dealt with the Muppets in a very different way than you would deal with ordinary puppets.”

Robinson also told me the Muppets lent a feeling of fantasy to the show, and when the Muppets were treated more like people (rather than puppets) you had a wonderful world in which children could relate. “They [the kids] never ask why an eight foot bird or a Snuffleupagus is walking down the Street. Things [were done] from the kids’ point of view, and I think the Muppets serve that purpose.”

Additionally, I inquired whether the Muppets could do things that adults could not. “Well, they can be very, very independent,” said Robinson. “They can be independent characters like the Count who just likes to count. You can’t imagine a human being doing that role. You couldn’t imagine a human being doing the Cookie Monster role. There are limitations in human beings that just don’t apply to puppets.”

When I asked Jane Henson, wife and creative partner of Jim Henson, about the Muppets she said, “We always felt that puppets could be anything. The puppets could be all shapes, sizes, and colors, and be called ‘monsters.’ Life is made up of everything—all different creatures acting in all different ways, and certainly [we were] hoping

to help children who were in the ghettos, who had to encounter all different things all the time. But they had their imaginations to draw on.”

While I was thinking over Henson’s point of view, I remembered how the use of puppets on *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood* was so different than on *Sesame Street*. So, I mentioned this to Henson, and she responded, “We [do] have a different feeling about fantasy than *Mister Rogers*. For instance, Fred Rogers is very careful to separate reality and fantasy, to not confuse children; he is very, very careful about that. Whereas our feeling is the great fun of life and of children is [having] fantasy and reality all sort of mixed up in one big bag, and we want to help children appreciate that.”

Chapter 5

Big Bird's Experiences

Big Bird portrays an intelligent preschooler —far from the beginning days of Sesame Street when he was a goofy, yokel bird. For a long time now, he has displayed a consistency in demeanor and educational level—an evolution that was necessary.

“We have learned [on *Sesame Street*] that puppets are able to compete very favorably with animation,” said Carroll Spinney.

Then Spinney spoke about the evolution of Big Bird's appearance. “[Originally,] Jim Henson wanted Big Bird to talk and sound like Mortimer Snerd,” (a comic dummy or puppet created by Edgar Bergen). “Henson's choice of making Big Bird so funky was because he envisioned the Bird to be very un-bright and funny.”

While I understood what Henson was aiming for, I asked Spinney if the country-yokel type was a bit too goofy.

“Yes, it turned out that Big Bird had to be less goofy and more like a child just learning about things,” said Spinney. “So Kermit Love added more feathers until Big Bird looked a little more smarter —just a little modification from Jim's original vision because Jim is an incredible genius.”

Spinney also pointed out that Big Bird could be likened to a porpoise. “Although, porpoises look like they are always smiling, the neat thing is I can hold the Bird in such a way as to make him appear to smile or be happy. [In addition,] the combination, of how I angle his head, where I hold the mouth, how wide, etc., and where his eyelids are, gives Big Bird the ability to appear to be thinking and realizing life because he looks like he is aware.”

Reading into a puppet like Big Bird, reminds me of what Gus Allegretti, puppeteer and actor on *Captain Kangaroo*, told me. “When I was hired to be on *Captain Kangaroo*, I told them I didn't make

puppets, and they said they knew and got someone to do the job. So, I met with the puppet maker, and he made these baldheads with no expression on the face. I was not use to this because the previous children's show where I worked used puppets, and the puppet maker use to make those puppets with eyes that moved sideways and ears that wagged and eyebrows that went up and down and jaws that worked."

I asked Allegretti how he responded to this change, and he told me that he finally asked the new puppet maker about his puppets. "The puppet maker said he always made puppets simply, and then he let the child put the expression on the face. He explained when creating a puppet, the creator should always make a neutral mouth line, and then the child will make it smile or grimace or frown."

"In fact, [this wisdom] applied to Mister Moose [on *Captain Kangaroo*]," recalled Allegretti. "People had come to me and sworn, 'Oh, I love that bit where Mister Moose's eyes closed and [he] went to sleep,' and I'd say, 'His eyes don't close.' 'Oh, yes they do! I remember his eyes closing.' And I'd say, 'His eyes don't close.'"

I couldn't believe the confidence of the show's viewers, and I mentioned this to Allegretti, who replied, "That's again what the puppets do for the children. It's a 'tabula rasa' for the child on which to write what they want to. It's a wonderful lesson. I think the art of [puppetry] is [expressed through] the child [as] the final provider of the emotion. The puppet makes the suggestion, but the child finishes it up."

Hearing this from Allegretti, I decided to ask Spinney his opinion about puppets, and why they are used on *Sesame Street*. Spinney said, "I think they have a tremendous advantage in that we try to reach all children—all shades of people. The fact is children recognize other children that are like them. For example, children with Down syndrome will notice other children with Down just as Black children identify with other Black children. But puppets don't have any race; they are all different colors and so all children can deal with them."

Based on what Spinney told me, it seemed like he wanted the children who watch *Sesame Street* to feel close to the Muppets as if they are human beings made up of all racial, cultural, and special-needs differences. Spinney agreed, "Yes, because children identify

more with puppets. I think it's just natural. For one thing, look at the popularity of stuffed animals. You know if your stuffed animal that's sitting there could suddenly perform for you you'd really be enchanted. On *Sesame Street* that's what you have —a bunch of stuffed animals that are alive!”

“It's almost like magic!” *No, to them it is magic*, I quietly corrected myself.

Following this, Spinney told me he needed to get “something off his chest.” He said that before Jim Henson died Henson was interviewed, and the interviewer wrote in an article that Henson said the magic comes from him. Spinney exclaimed, “I said, ‘No, Jim didn't say that!’ It seems like the interviewer read something into what Jim said. I just don't believe Jim to be that bold to brag that much and say, ‘Oh, we do magic.’ If there is some [magic], we're delighted there's something in the drama and the performance that can create that. [Like] the puppets for the children can create the magic. And that's probably what [Jim] was saying.”

Then Spinney declared, “Puppets can go where no man can walk, you know!”

Agreeing with him, we decided to take a short break from the interview. My mind wandered. I thought about *how Sesame Street blurs the line between fantasy and reality (which is a Henson creation), and Mister Rogers' Neighborhood, another show for preschoolers, does not. Then, I remembered a good story:*

Spinney was invited to be Big Bird on *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*. Fred Rogers, creator of this show, always made sure there was a clear division between reality and fantasy. Because of this separation, Rogers told Spinney that at one point in the show he wanted him to take off part of his Big Bird costume and reveal himself as being dressed up.

Perhaps, Spinney would have granted Rogers' request if what had happened in the past did not happen: Years ago, Big Bird was preparing to shoot a scene when a Klieg light, weighing a hundred pounds, fell and crashed a foot away from Big Bird throwing out broken glass and burning chunks of asbestos everywhere. Spinney then saw flames coming up the interior of the bird and yelled, “I'm on fire!”

And there wasn't a fire extinguisher in sight! However, Richie King, a cameraman, slapped the flames out with his hand and saved Spinney's life. In addition, *Look* magazine was there, doing a photo shoot!

Later on, Jim Henson, being Spinney's boss, saw a picture of his head sticking out of Big Bird's body in a photo in *Look* magazine and advised him that he should never be seen on television this way—with part of his Big Bird suit on. Henson felt this would destroy the image of what Big Bird is to the children, and a partial costume would ruin the fantasy aspect of the puppet. Spinney agreed with Henson. So, when Rogers requested he take off part of his Big Bird costume, showing the child audience he was dressed up, an argument ensued between them.

"Imagine having an argument with Fred Rogers!" Spinney said to me. "Rogers booked me to go on his show one year and then suddenly he had to cancel because he got the mumps. Two years later once again we got the request, and Rogers sent me a script. The script had me walking into his little house and Rogers would chat a bit with the bird. Then he would say, 'What's it like in there, Carroll? Take it off and show us how it works.'"

There was no way Spinney could do what Rogers requested of him, and Rogers said that it was necessary in order to teach the children. He explained how the *Neighborhood* works, "We keep it separate, that's why we have the trolley which goes to make-believe land. We point out [to the preschoolers] that's make-believe, and it's not real; it's make-believe. But reality is here; we have Brown's puppets on and we show how they work and everything."

To which Spinney replied, "That's fine. Those are marionettes, but they are not as realistic [as the Muppets]." Spinney told me he was on the phone with Rogers for twenty minutes, and Fred continued to suggest Big Bird couldn't be on the show.

"[Finally] I proposed, 'Let's change the script!'"

So, Rogers took Spinney out of the house and only had him as a guest in make-believe land. Intrigued by this, I asked if he was fine with this change, and he was, but added, "But then, you might as well not teach your children about Santa Claus because they are going to be a little disappointed."

Imagine having an argument with Mister Rogers, I repeated to myself. To really understand this phenomenon you will want to become familiar with this man: In the 2000th Issue Commemorative Edition of *TV Guide*, Rogers was aptly characterized as, “What You See Is What You Get” (July 27, 1991, p. 44). I can say from my personal experience of interviewing him that he was the same person on and off the television screen. That is, sitting across from Rogers was like watching him on TV. For me, Rogers possessed a gentle strength and a sincerity that allowed him to communicate to every child they are special.

But sometimes people thought that Rogers was too sincere—that he couldn’t laugh at himself. This image of him was finally dispelled. In the Commemorative Edition of *TV Guide*, the author wrote that one day in the studio Rogers’ crew played a practical joke on him. Every episode of his show use to open with Rogers singing the song, “Please Won’t You Be My Neighbor.” As he sang, Rogers took off his suit jacket (indicating he was changing into play clothes) and went to the closet to hang it up and in turn don a casual sweater and sneakers. One time, Rogers went to the closet and out popped a “scantily clad inflatable doll.” At first, he jumped back surprised and startled, but then got the joke and waltzed around the studio with it—laughing all the way! “Mister Rogers, a Presbyterian minister who talks sweetly to children, has a nice sense of humor,” the article concluded (*TV Guide*, July 27, 1991, p. 44).

Unfortunately, on February 27, 2003, Fred Rogers died of stomach cancer.

Chapter 6

More On the Muppets and Jim Henson

Caroll Spinney, who worked for Jim Henson since 1969, remembers not only how hard working Henson was, but he also loved his work. So much so, Henson often expressed that he would rather work than have time off. He often worked twelve to eighteen hours a day!

When I was interviewing Sam Newberry, supervising producer for *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*, I asked him about puppets, and he told me many puppeteers say that they take on a life of their own. I remember reading in Caroll Spinney's book (2003) that Big Bird knew how to dance (and could actually dance), but Spinney could not!

In an article that appeared in the June 18, 1990 issue of *People*, Duncan Kenworthy, vice-president of production at Henson Associates, said he remembered asking Jim one day how an early morning satellite show went. Henson replied, "I was terrible, but Kermit was *great*."

Kevin Clash, former puppeteer for Elmo, further illustrated the idea that puppets take on a life of their own in his book, *My Life as a Furry Red Monster* (2006). In the chapter on courage, Clash wrote about the puppeteers' visits to entertain terminally ill children. "I admit I found it particularly difficult when I first started doing the work, until I let Elmo take over.... For such a small monster, Elmo has an enormously brave heart. He's taught me so much about courage, especially about staying strong in the face of painful circumstances" (pp. 114-115).

Then, Clash recounted a time that "a beautiful little girl" in a wheelchair—with her eyes closed and showing absolutely no movement—appeared on the *Sesame Street* set one day, and he literally didn't know what to do. So, he let Elmo take over. "[Elmo]

knew that she could hear him, and he wanted a hug and wanted to give her one, as well, so he snuggled up close to her and started whispering the words to the song, ‘Sing.’” Clash said the little girl finally smiled, “[and] it took every bit of control I had to keep going” (Clash, 2006, pp. 115-116).

When I was interviewing Bob McGrath, who’s been an actor on *Sesame Street* since it began, he told me how Oscar the Grouch helped him to act. “My personal acting style is relatively calm and laid back, leaning more towards a Fred Rogers kind of presentation. I think you would call it gentle and sweet and easy going. [I believe] if [I] were to [act] without having something to counteract it, it could get, as Oscar would say, ‘Very yucky, very fast,’ and it could get very saccharin. Oscar and I have worked, I think, and people feel, incredibly well together.”

Also, McGrath said, “Working with anybody like Oscar, who gives the opposite point of view, shows children that everybody doesn’t have to be the same. You can have all these feelings of being hostile or angry or disagreeing, or all of the things Oscar does so well, and there is nothing wrong with that. It is okay not to feel like everybody else; it is okay not to feel great all the time. Yes, points of view are great; he is tremendous; he serves a tremendous function in that way. The show would be very, very different without Oscar.”

Just like McGrath enjoys Oscar the Grouch because he offers a non-saccharine point of view, I believe adults and children alike all have a favorite Muppet. People swoon over Elmo; I love Big Bird, and find Cookie Monster to be incorrigible. Others enjoy Ernie and Bert as fun roommates and quite the duo like Jim Henson and Frank Oz used to be. Originally, Kermit the Frog was a news reporter on *Sesame Street*, among other roles, but now he’s with Miss Piggy. Some of us are intrigued by Mr. Snuffleupagus. And I am convinced that Grover’s voice inhabits Yoda of *Star Wars* fame.

When talking about the Muppets, like all of us, I am reminded of Jim Henson, who died on May 16, 1990. I remember why I chose not to interview him even though he was alive and well at the time I was conducting my interviews. Carroll Spinney, who had worked for Henson since 1969, said Jim loved his work and kept himself either

doing a lot of it or always planning more. So, I didn't want to bother him.

In April of 1990, about a month before Henson died, I happened to be vacationing at Disney World in Orlando, Florida. My husband and I were walking around when all of a sudden I saw a crowd around Jim Henson who was rehearsing with Frank Oz. After quickly telling my husband whom the crowd was watching, we unobtrusively as possible took perhaps one of the last pictures of Henson alive.

Given that brief encounter with Jim, I was fortunate, however, to interview Jane Henson. During our interview, I sat in her office, drinking in her calm demeanor, and asking her many questions. Finally, I inquired why she thought *Sesame Street* was successful:

Jane exclaimed, "The children just love it, but also whoever the adults are who are on with the children also love it! And they all like it for a very good reason. Whoever is choosing those things [counting, animations] is choosing great pieces! I think that everybody involved with *Sesame Street* believes in it as a mission and as an artistic endeavor."

And while Jane Henson's reason may seem sufficient, I also want to add Sam Gibbon's opinion on Sesame's success. "The characters, the Muppet characters particularly, have to be acknowledged to be central [to the show's] success —Big Bird, Oscar, Ernie and Bert." Similarly, Fisch (2004) writes that a program's appeal is due to its characters.

On a related note, we have always assumed that the Muppets talked just like puppets do, but because the Muppets were considered monsters —in the best sense of the word— it was initially thought these "monsteroids," like Cookie Monster, would be too scary if they spoke. But one day Jeff Moss, head writer and songwriter, walked into Dave Connell's (the executive producer's) office and suggested the "monsteroids," starting with Cookie Monster say a few words like, milk and cookies. Once this happened, the Sesame staff quickly discovered that Cookie Monster was not scary, and neither would the rest of the monsters be. Moss led the way for the Muppets to talk up a storm, and Cookie Monster says, "Cowabunga!" (Borgenicht, 1998).

Mentioning Moss reminds me to deviate a bit, and share a part of my interview with him. Although he won fourteen Emmys while working at *Sesame Street*, Moss was, however, difficult to get there. He explained that after working as a production assistant at *Captain Kangaroo* and then going into the army and returning home, he just wasn't interested. "I said, 'No, I don't think so.' And then the Workshop called again and said, 'Please come and see what we're trying to do.'" Moss finally went.

Having seen what the Workshop was trying to do, Moss saw the opportunity for a great deal of freedom. So, he figured, "What the heck? It's worth six months of my life. Six years later I turned around and I was still there."

And so was Jim Henson. Many years of his life was spent at *Sesame Street*. Let's take a look at this creator of the Muppets:

When Henson's life was abruptly cut short, we were all surprised, and wondered if Kermit the Frog would continue on. Here was a man who tended to be unassuming yet created consummate entertainment with his characters. In the June 18, 1990 issue of *People*, an article titled, *Legacy of a Gentle Genius*, Henson was said to have written a letter to his children to be opened after his death. In it he modestly asked for just a few things to happen when he died. In another article Jane Henson said, "When Jim was alive, he [told me] if anything happened to him, Kermit must go on right away" (*TV Guide*, November, 1990, p. 20).

Kermit the Frog was a significant part of Jim, so much so that Joe Raposo, director of music, wrote a song, titled, "Bein' Green," specifically for Kermit. At Henson's memorial service Big Bird (aka Carroll Spinney) sang Raposo's song as a tribute, and there wasn't a dry eye in the place (Davis, 2008).

Bernie Brillstein, Henson's agent and long-time friend, said, in an interview with *People*, that he worked for Henson for thirty years without a contract. "[And] he was my biggest account, the backbone of this office, but if he wanted a meeting with you it was always, 'Do you mind? Do you have time?'" (June 18, 1990, p. 92)

In that same article in *People* magazine, Spinney, who worked for Jim for twenty years, said Henson would never say he didn't like

something. "He would just go 'Hmm.' And if he liked [something], he would say, 'Lovely.'" Also, Duncan Kenworthy, vice-president of production at Henson Associates, spoke about Jim's leadership style: 'His was a very gentle hand on the tiller.'

Cheryl, one of five Henson children, remembered what her father had once written: "I believe in taking a positive attitude toward the world. My hope still is to leave the world a little bit better than when I got here" (People, June 18, 1990, p. 96).

Now, I need to take a moment and clear up some confusion people have about the Muppets. First, there are Muppets that *only* appear on *Sesame Street* such as Big Bird, Oscar the Grouch, Cookie Monster, Elmo and the Count, etc. For a long time, Henson licensed these Muppets to the Workshop, and this business arrangement lasted even after his death. But a while ago, the Workshop was finally able to buy *their* Muppets and is now the proud owner of all the Muppets that appear on *Sesame Street*. This means the other Muppets, such as Miss Piggy, Kermit the Frog, etc. are owned by another company, which is Disney. It should be duly noted that the Workshop's ownership of its Muppets gives them, for the first time, absolute security because Disney, for example, cannot buy *Sesame Street* Muppets (Davis, 2008).

Chapter 20

The Role of Music

I asked Dave Connell, “What is the role of music in producing Sesame Street?” His initial response, “That’s an enormously important question!” Then he said, “Music is a wonderful spice to use in any dramatic production, and more significantly kids like it!”

Bob McGrath began explaining the role of music in *Sesame Street* by talking about how it encourages participation. “I think there’s mental participation and there’s some physical participation. All of our game songs are, musically, all active participation songs. I think music probably works better than almost anything in terms of getting a child to participate because there’s something inherent in music and rhythm that children latch onto.”

McGrath continued, “There are probably just thousands of participation pieces going on in the show all the time. For example, you can certainly [participate] with a song like “It’s Not That Easy Being Green” [‘Bein’ Green’] that Kermit sings. It may take a child a long time, but at some point in his life that may ring a bell where it’s not just about a frog thinking about himself being green. It may be whether you’re Black or Hispanic or whether you’re crippled or blind or deaf. So all of our musical things have been tremendously effective.”

“What is the role of music in producing *Sesame Street*?” I asked Dave Connell.

His initial response, “That’s an enormously important question!” Then he said, “Music is a wonderful spice to use in any dramatic production, and more significantly kids like it! You can teach kids stuff with music. For example, ‘One of These Things is Not Like the Others,’ is a musical piece to teach preschoolers classifying and sorting that became a big hit. [Music] clearly helps with some of the

affect issues like in the affective song, ‘Bein’ Green,’ a song written by the late Joe Raposo, *Sesame Street*’s music director.”

It’s not that easy bein’ green, having to spend each day the color of leaves, when I think it could be nicer bein’ red, or yellow, or gold, or something much more colorful like that. It’s not easy bein’ green. It seems you blend in with so many other ordinary things, and people tend to pass you over ‘cause you’re not standing out like flashy sparkles on the water, or stars in the sky.

As the song concludes I think to myself, *This is poetry in motion.*

But green is the color of spring, and green can be cool and friendly like, and green can be big like an ocean or important like a mountain or tall like a tree. When green is all there is to be, it could make you wonder why. But why wonder, why wonder? I am green, and it’ll do fine. It’s beautiful, and I think it’s what I want to be (Raposo & Moss, 1971, pp. 82-85).

“[In addition to ‘Bein’ Green,] Raposo’s musical style also gave [*Sesame Street*’s theme song] a very distinctive sound like, ‘Boom, chick-a-boom, chick-a-boom, chick-a-boom, chick-a-boom,’” said Jon Stone. “When any child in this country hears [that theme] song, all of a sudden he knows without seeing the television what it is because there is a musical signature to the show,” Stone explained.

Jane Henson agreed with Stone, and added another reason why the sound of *Sesame Street* is important:

“Well, again [this] was part of the original concept that music was essential, that whatever music was going on was essential. Maybe I should say the sound was essential,” clarified Henson. So, what the show sounded like was of utmost importance. Whether the mother was in the kitchen, hearing it in the other room. What kind of sound that show put into the home or put into the space was of utmost importance

and what [parents] were aware of at all times—how this show sounded.

Knowing the Workshop agreed with Henson, I still wanted Evelyn Davis' thoughts:

“The Workshop believed part of *Sesame Street's* outreach to the community was its sound. It satisfied moms, encouraging them to watch with their children.

Let's recall part of *Sesame Street's* theme song:

Sunny day, sweep-in' the clouds away, on my way to
where the air is sweet. Can you tell me how to get,
how to get to Sesame Street? Come and play!
Everything's A Okay. Friendly neighbors there, that's
where we meet. Can you tell me how to get, how to
get to Sesame Street? (Raposo & Moss, 1971, pp. 7-8).

Bruce Hart and Jon Stone wrote the lyrics to Sesame's theme song because Raposo “didn't like to do his own lyrics. He hated having to come up with lyrics,” remembered Danny Epstein, who worked with Raposo before *Sesame Street*, and sometimes at the Workshop. For instance, Epstein helped Raposo create the frolicsome sound of this theme song (Davis, 2008).

“Yet, Raposo's dislike for writing lyrics seemed interesting,” Epstein admitted, “since he would come up with lyrics to songs like ‘Sing,’ or ‘Somebody Come and Play,’ or ‘Bein' Green’—those are his lyrics! But Raposo always said, ‘Give me a lyric and I'll set the lyrics to music,’ so we would get lyrics from the scriptwriters.”

When I was preparing to interview Danny Epstein I was deciding where to place my recorder, and he quickly pointed and said, “There—that'll work.” I immediately felt reassured it was the right place to record since Epstein is the coordinator (and sometimes the producer) of *Sesame Street's* musical tracks.

Then, sitting across from him, I asked about the role of music on *Sesame Street*. He stated, “The role of music is the binding ingredient

between interest or lack of interest. It is what keeps the child's attention; it is what holds an interest."

Epstein pointed out that music is probably more entertaining or interesting for the child than just straight talk. He backed this claim up by saying, "[In the early days] research showed preschoolers were watching a lot of television and interestingly enough the only information the child retained were the commercials. The commercials, for the most part, are singing spots."

I asked Stone his thoughts about the role of music, and he said it is important: "Practically everything in *Sesame Street* is underscored with music. Practically all the films, [and] many of the puppet pieces begin or end with music; there are a lot of songs from the Muppets. There is music on the Street. It is one way of involving the child in the whole process of the television viewing experience. If there is music playing, a 2-and-a-half or 3-year-old is going to get up off his chair and start bopping around the room and moving to it!"

Epstein agreed with Stone and exclaimed, "*Sesame Street* is heavy on music! You go from one segment to the other and you're going to find music in every item in the show. Very few pieces are dry."

Given his enthusiasm, I asked Epstein why *Sesame Street* is so heavy on music.

"Music does hold attention. The better the piece of music the more attention I think you will get out of the kids —out of anyone, child or adult. It's going to keep you glued to that piece of information."

"Even if the visual is bad?" I asked.

"I don't know," Epstein said. "That's a good question. We never had a bad visual so I can't— We never had anything bad. Remember, the recorder is running. Well, generally, I'll tell you those pieces are good, those visuals are good."

"It's the same thing we could ask in reverse," I proposed. "Let's say we had bad music, but the visual was good?"

"We never reached those levels, those extremes in any of those situations," replied Epstein.

"Both audio and visual are equally good all the time," I paraphrased.

After my interview with Epstein, I remembered an article I read about the brain's processing of audio and visual information. The article, "Do Trainees Learn In Technicolor," explained how the brain works when viewing media that run at a predetermined rate, such as television or film. So, how does the human brain work to gain as much information as possible during an episode of *Sesame Street*?

Evidently, the brain can't take in visual and audio information simultaneously. Rather it switches back and forth between the visual and the audio "tracks." When the visual track contains "the most significant message," according to the viewer, the brain focuses solely on the visual track until the audio track contains the most significant message. Then the brain switches to the audio track, which now, to the viewer, communicates the most significant message. Even though the brain switches back and forth between the visual and audio tracks during a television program, it is still quite efficient in "accept[ing] and process[ing] an amazing amount of data" (Dunnit, 1982, pp. 1-2).

However, when the visual is bad, the brain switches to the musical track and holds a viewer's attention, compensating for the bad visual. Conversely, when the music is bad and the visual is good the brain focuses, or "locks onto" the visual track and disregards the musical one.

After hearing Epstein say both music and visuals on *Sesame Street* are equally good all the time, then, as stated above, the brain simply acquires information by switching back and forth between the music and the visuals. But because each viewer's brain or each preschooler's brain is different, the switching back and forth between the tracks is individually different according to one's preferences.

Collectively, though, preschoolers' brains will reject a segment that is boring to them such as, in the instance when a folk singer is sitting on a stool, playing a guitar and not moving to the music. Lesser, in his book (1974) said that in order to remedy this and for music to be effective in keeping preschoolers' attention, it must be "integrated carefully with visual movement. Children's attention will be lost if the music is associated with static visual material" (p. 106).

Jeff Moss, who has written many wonderful songs for *Sesame Street*, including his famous, "Rubber Duckie," and a beautiful

operetta for Sesame's wedding episode, said this about the role of music on the show:

"I think [music] is important because it's something children like and react to, and I think you can do a lot with it. I think it's memorable, and the children like to move; they like to go with the beat. And it's very, very useful. It is another tool, but it's a slightly more important tool. Joe Raposo and I were writing songs, and they turned out to be very useful."

Knowing the greatness of both Moss and the late Raposo, I asked for more of an explanation.

"As it turned out [music] has been a tremendously helpful tool, which we stumbled into. We didn't think of it [in that way]; I don't think the research people thought of [music as so helpful] back then [because] music [was just for entertainment]. But music is easy to remember; it's easy to make points [with music]; it's easy to repeat — [music] bears repetition."

"And music helps kids remember," I suggested.

"Yes, absolutely, it helps them remember," replied Moss, "because it's easier to remember a jingle than Shakespeare. Music gives structure. Rhyme gives it structure, which a lot of songs have. Singing is more fun than reciting."

"And kids come away learning the lyrics in commercials," I added.

"Absolutely," Moss agreed. "That was one of the original ideas — 'Sesame Street is brought to you by the letter C and the number 3.'"

Gerald Lesser's book, *Children And Television: Lessons From Sesame Street* (1974), discusses music's multifaceted role and he lists some of its uses:

- Music regains a child's attention.
- Music is an aid to memory in the learning of sequence material.
- Music is a direct means for teaching some basic skills such as auditory discrimination.
- Music evokes physical participation. (pp. 103-106)

Referencing Lesser, I asked Epstein whether music helps in learning. “There are short pieces of information that the child will remember. And there is also the process of rote; there is great repetition. I think there’s the fun of singing something with rhythm, something that’s fun to sing, something that’s fun to be part of—sing along, or clap-along or even jump along or move along.”

“So, music encourages audience participation and learning? I asked.

“I think its participation, and just the general idea of singing along; I think the process of learning is stimulated somehow. I’m not an educator, but I would think there’s an educational process going on there someplace.”

“Oh, there is!” I exclaimed. “Certainly when a youngster participates like they do with music, they’re learning a lot more than if they just sit back and don’t participate.”

“It’s a known fact that rhythm and music will hold someone’s attention,” added Epstein. “I think a child or adult will capture your attention and hold you for enough point in time to learn something.”

All of a sudden a research finding sprung to mind. I told Epstein research showed that a celebrity, appearing on *Sesame Street*, who is just playing an instrument and singing, sitting on a stool rather than moving to the music, will cause preschoolers’ attention to drop.”

Epstein repeats, “The attention went down when someone was playing an instrument.”

“You know,” I said, “a folk singer would come in and is seated on a chair, or a stool, or a step and is playing a guitar, singing to maybe three or four children.

“And they were bored?” asked Epstein.

“Yes!” The preschoolers’ attention plummeted.”

“It happens; it happens. As much as I love music, not every piece is a gem and is going to hold your attention. Some can turn you off totally,” reasoned Epstein.

As mentioned before, Lesser (1974) expressed this caveat: If music and sound effects are to be effective in evoking participatory activities among young children, then while there’s music there must be some sort of visual movement happening on the TV screen. In other

words, it's necessary to integrate music or sound effects with an accompanying visual action. For example, have a dancer dancing to the beat of the music, or a letter being formed to a sound effect. If the visual is static on the screen, like a folk singer seated on a stool singing a song on her guitar, then this static image will not prompt the children to actively respond and a preschooler will lose interest, turning away to do something else.

When I asked Jon Stone about the role of music in a children's show, he said, "It is probably the second best attention-holder in terms of audio is music. [But] the best attention-getter in terms of audio is no audio at all! As soon as the child doesn't hear anything, he comes right back to the television to find out why there's no noise on the TV. If you really want to get him back after a boring segment, just stop talking for awhile and he'll return."

My question —What is the role of music in the production of *Sesame Street*? — was initially answered by Bob McGrath this way. "Well, it is not the role it plays in a children's show; it is integral to life, really."

McGrath continued, "You see, I think everyone is very, very musical. There is a very successful method of teaching music called Dalcroze Eurhythmics. It is a very well accepted method of teaching rhythm and beat and music through movement. [My opinion is] children learn best if they're using movement within the process of learning. That is basically why all the hand clapping games and all kinds of physical games go along with a song. If you can combine a physical movement with music, they just learn it better."

McGrath told me he's learned through years of working with young children —sometimes even up to third grade— that a kinesthetic approach, which incorporates a lot of bodily movement in their learning, is a useful tool in teaching. He also said he has been a keynote speaker and conducted many workshops at early childhood teacher conferences. So, I asked him, "What do you encourage them to do?"

"I am encouraging teachers to combine physical movements along with songs to teach literacy skills. And children playing percussion

instruments —that can also be used [as a teaching tool to learn] important literacy skills.”

I asked McGrath why else should teachers use music in the classroom. “[I want to also] keep music and the arts alive in the classroom. There is music in the rhythm of architecture. There is rhythm in life. So when you can incorporate movement along with music you are approaching sort of the best of all possible worlds.”

“We all know kids can sing the alphabet before they can say it,” McGrath reminded me. “If a musical presentation of counting or [the] alphabet is given to them, then they will almost always go in that direction as opposed to saying it.”

Rhythm permeates all of us. We can remember rhythms thirty or more years later, and this relationship between one note and another, making up a pattern of timing and beats, is the reason we get on our feet and dance the night away, exchanging energy from our bodies to the musical instruments and back again! In the brain, when an instrument is played many higher regions, such as the motor cortex and frontal lobes are involved, causing us to naturally gravitate toward sound (Levitin, 2006).

Chapter 22

Bringing In the Real World and Going International

“I’ve always felt that if the show accomplished nothing more over the course of years than showing that different kinds of people can co-exist and get along well together that would have been worth the great exercise, and of course the only way that can happen is with live people.”

I’ve watched many children’s shows on KPBS (San Diego), and a lot of them do not have live people. But at the end of each episode, through live action film, children are shown with adults practicing or applying the educational content just presented.

But there is a show on KPBS called *Between the Lions*. This show is comparable to *Sesame Street* but aimed at older children age’s four to seven. *Between the Lions* has live actors named “Fred,” played by Fred Newman, and “Dr. Ruth,” played by Dr. Ruth Westheimer.

In one episode we see Dr. Ruth analyzing a word’s problem in her office. The word, “STOP” is seated on the couch, lamenting how he can’t get going in life. Dr. Ruth compassionately says by replacing the ST with an H, forming the word, “HOP,” should solve the problem. And it does, as STOP is transformed to HOP and delightfully hops away. Then, she turns to the camera and says, “I’m good!”—meaning she’s glad, as we all are, when good ideas pop into our heads.

As I finished watching the program, I saw in the credits that Norman Stiles, former head writer for *Sesame Street*, is presently the head writer for *Between the Lions*, and this made it clear to me why live actors were in the show.

Bob McGrath stated, “I hope a human being has something to add to a show as opposed to just [doing] animation.”

During my interview with McGrath, he told me about a wonderful moment that happened to him at the airport: “I was flying out [of

Newark] and this young Black girl was behind the counter, and she hollered and said, ‘Hi, Bob!’ And we started talking. I said, ‘Didn’t you grow up with us on [*Sesame Street*]?’ And she said, ‘Oh, yes!’ And I said, ‘You must be very smart,’ and started laughing. I said, ‘I suppose we changed your entire life,’ and she got very serious and said, ‘Yes, as a matter of fact you did.’ I said, ‘Really?’ ‘Yes!’ She said she was watching what goes on —she said it was seeing Black, White, Hispanic, all of these people laughing, being very good friends, getting along together on the show, and she said, ‘I was amazed because I didn’t know that could happen in [real] life.’”

After hearing this, I began to think about how television is a socializing agent. Such is the case with *Mister Rogers’ Neighborhood*. I asked Fred Rogers to tell me the purpose of his television series. “We really wanted to give children a visit from an uncle-like person —a neighbor. I think that almost anybody who has had parents who work most of the day and they turned out to be interested, interesting people have said, ‘You know there was always a neighbor; there was a librarian; there was a teacher; there was somebody who really seemed to care about me.’ You can [often] hear that from kids who have grown up. [And], well, we wanted to offer somebody on television who would be a neighbor, who showed that childhood was important, and consequently children have value.”

On *Sesame Street*, children see many role models including women of strength such as Hillary Rodham Clinton, who first appeared on the show during its twenty-fifth season. Clinton, at the time, was dressed in green because she and the Muppet Rosita were promoting health through eating vegetables. On the set, no one knew who was most enamored “Hillary Clinton by the Muppets, or the Muppets by Hillary Clinton” (Blume, *TV Guide*, November 13-19, 1993, p. 8). It seems the enchantment went both ways.

During a break in taping, an off-camera joke was made about Swiss chard, and quick as a wink Clinton incorporated it in her lines. So on the next take when “she tells kids to eat their Swiss chard, everyone cracks up” (Blume, *TV Guide*, November 13-19, p. 8).

Mentioning that the Muppets “are just as fresh and funny today as they ever were,” Judy Blume, juvenile author, asked Clinton, “So why,

with [your] hectic schedule, did [you] decide to appear on *Sesame Street*?"

"I've always loved *Sesame Street* [and it] was a big part of Chelsea's life when she was a little girl. We watched the show, read the books—we even visited the set!" (Blume, *TV Guide*, November 13-19, p. 10).

Additionally, Caroll Spinney commented that having a "cool" guy as a role model or father figure for viewers to emulate is extremely important. Spinney cited Matt Robinson, who played Gordon on *Sesame Street* for the first three years, as one such example. "This guy was so cool; he was so laid back and cool. This was one of the coolest guys on television! And here's a man like Gordon who was taking the time to [teach vocabulary like] what smooth is, what rough is, so when the children show up at school they will have more [vocabulary]. [For example,] an inner city child could have as low as twelve vocabulary words because his parent only says, 'Get down;' 'go away;' 'go play.'"

Just like other parents, I didn't do everything right, but I did do some things right. Namely, I talked to my son in complete sentences. Instead of saying, 'Go play!' I said, "Let's play a game. What game do you want to play? Oh, Candy Land! Let's pretend to eat our favorite gumdrop when we come to that land; I'd love to eat a big cherry gumdrop or a big black gumdrop! What's your favorite, Daniel?"

Instinctively, I knew verbal interaction was good, and it felt good to me too. *At A Loss For Words (2005)* is a book by Betty Bardige that discusses the importance of talking to your child in complete sentences from day one. Her premise is we are "failing our children," if we do not converse with them, and therefore they are at risk of falling behind.

Of course, the actors on *Sesame Street* do not do one-on-one language interaction, as I or some other parents do, because studies show that "children can hear torrents of words from radio, television, or even overheard conversation and pick up none of them" (Bardige, 2005, p. 25). Thus, the interaction has to be personal and directed to the child (Klass, 2015).

But there are some language skills that can be, and are taught on *Sesame Street* such as Spinney's example of Gordon teaching

vocabulary. Also, when I asked Emily Kingsley about the show's main purpose she discussed its ties to language development:

“Disadvantaged kids were coming into school with so little basics, so few basic skills that their very earliest experiences in school were negative ones. The theory was if we can give these kids a couple of things that they can do, [such as] being able to recite the alphabet; give them something they can learn; give them the alphabet; give them a half dozen letters they can identify; let them be able to count to ten— Then maybe their earliest experiences with education will be positive rather than negative so they will feel like a success.”

The idea being—”

“The idea is perhaps gaining these early skills and entering school with these basic skills, and having these early positive experiences might affect their whole attitude towards the educational process! Maybe they won't drop out of school quite so early. Maybe they will stick it out longer. Maybe they will get turned on to learning a little bit more. Maybe they will feel a little bit more hopeful about their own future, and their ultimate career and life possibilities. It's optimistic, but that's the business we're in!”

On *Sesame Street* a plethora of language skills are taught including pre-reading and writing. The Workshop has greatly expanded what can be taught on television, and each episode has role models that teach preschoolers every day. As they teach, these actors communicate to their audience that being a success in school is possible, and learning is fun.

Finally, there has to be a balance. Jon Stone said that having only live people or actors on a children's show doesn't work either. He gave an example of the early test shows done in the summer of 1969. “We did five shows which were never designed to go on the air; they were just designed to go out in the marketplace and be tested to see if we were doing it right. We, on the advice of our advisors and consultants, had separated make-believe from reality [just like on *Mister Rogers' Neighborhood*] because children very often have a problem with that distinction.”

“And so we made *Sesame Street*, the Street itself, reality. And whenever we went to puppets, cartoons or other elements that was

someplace else; it didn't take place on the Street. There were no puppets on the Street [with the live actors]. The Street segments died. The attention graphs just went from the top of the page on puppets and top of the page on animation and [when the show came] back to the Street with [just] live actor people —no matter how interesting, how good the material or whether they were singing or dancing—the attention span just dropped right to the bottom of the page.”

Curious about the end result, I asked Stone how the Workshop responded to these findings. He said, “We realized immediately we were going to have to populate the Street with puppets as well as people.”

Despite the fact that Stone's explanation made sense, I found myself thinking, *Why does the very definite separation between reality and make-believe on Mister Rogers' Neighborhood work?* So, I asked Joan Cooney.

“I don't really know,” was Cooney's response to my question. I really can only talk about why we're successful. I don't know why *Captain Kangaroo* [or] *Mister Rogers'* lasted, and each is peculiar. With *Mister Rogers'* it has to do with Fred Rogers' own personality and his intelligence and his carefulness, but there's a program that really depends on a single talent.”

I believe Cooney made an important point when she used the word, “peculiar” to differentiate each television series because each is unique due to its creators. So, we can't (and don't want to) compare them, but rather consider each series individually.

Spinney exclaimed, “I love our wonderful, integrated— These fantasy characters move among real people. I mean there [are] three “kids!” One of these is a Muppet, two are real, [and] children can relate. I think [children] like to see the two worlds together.”

“Is there something about the mix that works?”

“Yes,” replied Spinney, “like a Muppet show such as *Fraggle Rock*. There is always at least one human in the show. I think they just work wonderfully together.”

And the movie, *Avatar* —for all its technological wonder— can't and does not do without actors (Heffernan, *New York Times Magazine*, February 21, 2010).

As the real world turns on *Sesame Street*, the Workshop travels abroad. Jane Henson elegantly explained why this can happen. “I think everybody involved with *Sesame Street* believes in it as a mission and as an artistic endeavor. It is like this wonderful ball that keeps being passed from hand to hand to hand to hand to hand, but some of the people who have stayed— So, it really knows what it is; it really knows who it is. *Sesame Street* knows what it is well enough so that it can then pass on from hand to hand.”

Germany is the first stop where *Sesamstrasse* has existed since 1973. *Sesamstrasse* is so popular among the German people that they believe Bert and Ernie originated in their country. “[These Muppets have] become so much a part of the culture there that people would never even believe that they’re American,” said former puppeteer Kevin Clash (*Sesame Workshop, Germany*, p. 1).

In Germany, for *Sesamstrasse*’s thirtieth anniversary, Clash was there to help with a television special, celebrating this momentous occasion. At the time, when Clash learned Bert and Ernie were to play a big part in this German special, he concentrated his efforts on two puppeteers, Carsten Haffke and Martin Paas. Working with them, Clash suggested Haffke and Paas go outside to shoot their Bert and Ernie segments rather than always shooting them on the set. “So we went outside onto the back lot and these guys sang *Imagination Song* in German, and it was just beautiful. The sun was shining on the trees; it was just amazing. So now that’s how they shoot [their] Ernie and Bert pieces —on location, and they are phenomenal” (*Sesame Workshop, Germany*, p.1).

Because *Sesamstrasse* is centered on Froebel’s theories, let me tell you about this German educator: In 1840 the German population started embracing kindergarten from Friedrich Froebel who coined the term “kindergarten,” which means a child’s garden. Froebel believed above all that children’s self-directed play nurtures them. “[Through] their natural play, each individual child can develop in the way that’s best for them” (*Sesame Workshop, Sesamstrasse*, p. 1). Froebel also believed that kindergarten gives children good social skills, and helps to develop their critical thinking.

Thus, Froebel's theories serve as "the basis for early childhood education [and for *Sesamstrasse*]." Basia Nikonorow who produced this television series, said that consequently it is low in cognitive goals, unlike *Sesame Street* in America, and is particularly high in 'socio-emotional goals like sharing, learning about one's environment, figuring out problems and taking turns' (Sesame Workshop, Germany, p 1).

Since 2003, *Sesamstrasse* has included topics on diversity, such as respect for one another, and understanding differences. The show's goal is to explore differences in light of how they enrich us, not separate us. For example, *Sesamstrasse* now has a Turkish-German cast member named Mehmet. Mehmet likes to play with the Muppets, enjoys sports and hip-hop music, and is technologically savvy. Because Germany has at least two thousand mosques, it is important to teach preschoolers about the various Muslim communities, and that they are not all the same. The show recognizes that individualizing Muslims is necessary because some speak Arabic and others do not, and some celebrate certain holidays or traditions and others do not.

Additionally on *Sesamstrasse*, children are allowed to bring up prejudices and discuss them. Also, single-parent households are becoming more prevalent in Germany and to recognize this reality Mona and her baby, Lena, are two characters on the show.

Traveling from Germany, the Workshop goes to South Africa. Working in the spirit of former President Nelson Mandela, who was the first Black democratic leader of South Africa, *Takalani Sesame* was created. *Takalani* means 'be happy' "in TshiVenda, one of South Africa's eleven official languages," and this version of *Sesame Street* represents racial harmony. On the Street of this show "all the accents [are] there and all the colors [are] there," including Bert and Ernie who speak with different accents.

An actual train station is on the studio set along with industrial, township, and rural scenes. The inclusion of a train station is extremely important because in South Africa it symbolizes connecting with all peoples, being able to go to work, plus visiting family. One gets the explicit idea in this "Rainbow Nation," with its spectrum of races, that no one cares whether your skin is purple, orange or polka-

dotted, but it's how you speak to each other —the tone and respect in your voice. Also, Kami, an HIV-positive Muppet, who doesn't hide her invisible difference, has been included in this ever-widening circle of tolerance. Kami's presence hopes to dispel the stigma associated with this disease and to encourage those with HIV to seek care for their selves.

In 1994, the Workshop went to Columbia, and sent Ginger Brown, executive producer, to create *Plaza Sesamo*.

Awhile after *Plaza Sesamo* was created, it so happened that Brown, traveling on a flight from Bogota to New York in April 2007, told the passenger seated next to her about her work and he spontaneously suggested she meet the vice-president of Columbia who happened to be on the same plane! Vice President Francisco Calderon, being informed of Brown's presence, got out of his seat and shook her hand, saying excitedly he had grown up with *Plaza Sesamo*. (This was because an earlier show had been produced in 1972.) And now, he said his kids love *Plaza Sesamo*.

Additionally, in 2006 the Sesame Workshop and the World Heart Federation collaborated to create a Colombian initiative that promotes healthy living and therefore, a healthy heart. It was decided that Colombian children would represent this initiative through their film animations, giving them the opportunity to show and speak about health on *Plaza Sesamo*.

Currently, *Plaza Sesamo* airs in thirty-four Latin American countries. The show covers health and gender equality in addition to educating preschoolers. *Plaza Sesamo* also produces materials indigenous to a child's country and culture, which is one way of making sure children in the various countries feel represented on the show. Because of this, preschoolers become familiar with other countries such as, Argentina, Chile, Colombia, El Salvador, Guatemala, Mexico, and Peru. Recently, the set of *Plaza Sesamo* was updated and now a Mercado, which is a small market in the towns of all Latin American countries, is vividly present with its familiar brightly colored buildings painted pink, purple and blue.

When I visited Russia, I was in such awe seeing their architectural wonders that I forgot to watch *Ulitsa Sezam*, their version

of *Sesame Street*. However, at the State Tretyakov Gallery in Moscow, there was a ten-year celebration of this show.

This Gallery is a famous fine arts museum, and children's artwork was displayed in honor of *Ulitsa Sezam*. In fact, "the entire entrance wing of [this] immense museum" was dedicated to art pieces that children had drawn of their mother, father, sisters, brothers, grandmothers (babuskas) cats, dogs, friends and themselves. Bringing aesthetic pleasure to parents and children alike, the exhibition represented a main educational goal of *Ulitsa Sezam*, that of, "Sparkling children's interest in artistic and creative expression" (Sesame Workshop, Russia, p. 1).

Since Russia is a cultural country, preschool viewers watching *Ulitsa Sezam* are taught to think out of the box, and not concern themselves with too many rules, but look to see "what sparks them" in the cultural arts. For example, Businka, a cast member on the show, encourages preschoolers, in her art segment, to develop a sense of experimentation with art: Don't follow the rules of how a picture should look! Draw that house in an abstract way or create a bigger than life Van Gogh flower!

Continuing along this theme of creative expression, *Ulitsa Sezam* uses live action films to tell stories, and these films are about various regions in Russia. Storytelling here is more in pictures and less in words. For instance, I have a set of matryoshka dolls that were hand painted by a local artist in Uglich, near Moscow, and each "doll," richly painted, tells the story of *The Frog Princess*. But perhaps better than matryoshka dolls is storytelling the traditional Russian way, that is, through filming. And in *Ulitsa Sezam* these filmed stories are of ethnic groups inhabiting Russia, such as a Siberian boy being taught to lasso a reindeer's antlers by his grandfather.

It is said the Netherlands version of *Sesame Street*, that is, *Sesamstraat*, is as well known and loved as ours in the United States. *Sesamstraat* has been on the air since 1976 with Bert and Ernie and a newcomer in December 2003—a baby Muppet pig, named Purk! Purk is so popular with the children that a tulip has been named after him. And Oh, those rows and rows of colorful tulips that grow in Keukenhof Gardens!

Just as an aside, when I was a little girl I lived across the street from Joan Rivers' house. In her front yard behind a white picket fence, Joan's parents planted rows of different colored tulips. I mean there were deep purple, juicy orange, bright yellow, ruby red, lily-white, and Easter pink ones that drove me crazy with delight. So one day I took my Easter basket and clipped tulips of every hue, arranging them beautifully in it, and then I rang the doorbell. Joan's mother answered the door and I proceeded to sell her tulips back to her for five cents a piece. Well, behind my small frame she saw all these long, green stems blowing back and forth in the breeze, and then she called my mother.

Getting back to *Sesamstraat*, the show is being viewed by many minorities in the Netherlands, including preschoolers from Turkey, Morocco, Algeria and Suriname. Because of this, Sesame Workshop associate producer Estee Bardanashvili said that *Sesamstraat* 'puts forward a positive image of a multicultural community' (Sesame Workshop, Netherlands, p. 1). Along with Sien Diels, a Dutch cast member, there are also Turkish and Moroccan youth actors who dispel the stereotype that these minorities are troublemakers. Just the opposite, on the show they are seen as problem-solvers.

School bullying is a huge problem in the Netherlands and the amount of victims is staggering. In order to combat bullying, *Sesamstraat* Muppets, Tommie, Leniemienie, Pino, and Purk, learn to deal with emotions of anger and fear by expressing them; therefore, they rid of their negative feelings in a healthy way. In the show's bullying scenarios, these Muppets are often seen resolving a rift in communication on their own without adult intervention. The key is respectful communication and empathy.

In 2004, a new set was conceived and built for *Sesamstraat*. Picked from a range of designers' submissions, was Erly Brugmans' design, which is more abstract than the old set. "[It] looks like a bunch of giant wooden children's blocks...stacked in disarray across the set," and there are broccoli trees scattered about! (Sesame Workshop, Netherlands, p. 2) Kevin Clash, former senior creative advisor for the Workshop, said this about the new set: 'It's a child's imagination, and

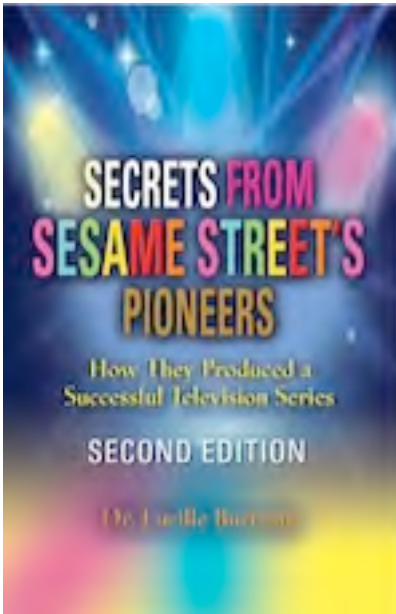
it's gorgeous. I don't know how they did it, but it works beautifully' (Sesame Workshop, Netherlands, p. 2).

If anything can be done to patch up tension-filled relationships, then *Sesame Street* should be tried. In 2004 UNICEF and the Sesame Workshop worked together to create an Albanian show called *Rruga Sesam* and a Serbian show titled, *Ulica Sezam* to heal "rifts between the Kosovo-Albanian and Kosovo-Serb peoples as they move toward reconciliation" (Sesame Workshop, Kosovo, p. 2). Each show stresses similarities between the two groups such as spending time with family, a sibling, or one's grandmother. This is the Workshop's attempt to undo hatred that children have learned toward others of different ethnic groups.

The production team for *Rruga Sesam* / *Ulica Sezam* had originally started out with story lines showing Albanians and Serbians interacting with each other. But soon the team met with a "wrinkle" of sorts when they realized that Kosovo-Albanian and Kosovo-Serb children don't mingle in real life. They have separate schools, transportation, languages and even post offices. So the team decided to produce montages: First, they'd shoot a film sequence of Albanian children doing an activity in their place and time, and then shoot a comparable film sequence of Serbian children doing the same activity. Then, the producers combined these film sequences cinematically into a film montage, and the resultant effect is "film clips" of Albanian children interspersed amongst Serbian children doing the same or similar activities. Also, added to each montage are film clips of Roma, Turkish, and Bosnian youngsters doing similar activities.

The primary lessons learned in *Rruga Sesam* and in *Ulica Sezam* are tolerance toward children who speak a different language, are of another ethnicity, different skin color, appearance or religion. Consequently, *Rruga Sesam* / *Ulica Sezam* episodes teach actions '[that] break down stereotypes and show each one of us is unique and is to be respected for who we are,' said Basia Nikonorow, the Workshop's producer. (Sesame Workshop, Kosovo p. 2)

The show's concept is like the book *It's Okay to be Different* (Parr, 2001) and I'll add in all the ways that we are!



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