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# Jim Henson's Fantastic World: **A Retrospective**

**The most sensational, inspirational, celebrational, Muppetational, Jim Henson exhibition is touring the country. Jennifer K. Stuller reports on its stop in Seattle.**

**W**e've seen him on TV lately. The commercial footage for *American Express* is old, but the voice is so recognizable. "Do you know me?" he asks. Of course we do, but, just in case, he reminds us, "I created the Muppets."

He is Jim Henson. Puppeteer, voice actor, and Kermit the Frog's alter ego. Creator of the Muppets, yes, but this kind genius also gave the world cherished television shows like *Sesame Street* and *Fraggle Rock*, as well as fantasy movies

Jim Henson with Bert toy, c. 1971

Photograph by Ted Neuhoff. ©2007 The Jim Henson Company. All Rights Reserved.



Jim Henson with Kermit the Frog in 1978 on the set of *The Muppet Movie*.

The complicated technology of the drill team mechanical puppets allowed two puppeteers (here, Jim Henson and Jerry Juhl, in 1961) to manipulate the whole battalion of soldiers at once. This experimentation laid the groundwork for the internal mechanisms later used to control characters' facial expressions.

*Labyrinth and The Dark Crystal.*

Although Henson died unexpectedly from pneumonia in 1990 at the all-too-young age of 54, generations of children who matured after his passing are still under his sway of gentle teaching and humor—as are their parents, who can now appreciate his creative gifts on a whole new level.

*Jim Henson's Fantastic World*—a career-spanning retrospective of his work—has the capacity to charm both the very young and the young at heart.

The exhibition was conceived by Karen Falk, head archivist at The Jim Henson Company, and Jane Henson, Mr. Henson's widow, and executed in collaboration with the Smithsonian Institution Traveling Exhibition Service (SITES). Original drawings, photographs, video footage, and of course, Muppets, provide an intimate look into Henson's creative process and "visual thinking."

*Jim Henson's Fantastic World* is currently on a 12-venue tour of the United States—with future stops in Jackson, MS; Fresno, CA; and Chicago, IL—but the literary, musical and cinematic aspects of Henson's work make its summer stop at the Experience Music Project|Science Fiction Museum (EMP|SFM) a particularly happy marriage of curating and culture.

"The Experience Music Project|Science Fiction Museum is such an ideal place for Jim Henson," says Falk, who in addition to her role as archivist also sits on the Board of Directors for The Jim Henson Legacy. "Even though he's not a musician per se, and people don't think of him in terms of science fiction, the kinds of people that are interested in those things are interested in Jim's work. So it's really a fun venue for this exhibit."

Henson's use of music in everything from counting videos on *Sesame Street* to the many musical guest stars of *The Muppet Show* clearly

fits in with the Experience Music Project side of the museum, but as EMP|SFM director of public programming, Sam Vance, notes the science-fiction component of the museum explores the "What ifs?" of our world. "Jim created such amazing worlds that were totally full," says Vance. "And [this retrospective] seemed like a good fit for us."

*Jim Henson's Fantastic World*, covers much more than the lovable Muppets. Falk dug deep into the Archives to curate an exhibition that emphasizes "Jim the man" as well as "Jim the puppeteer"—an intrinsic part of the Legacy's mission. "There had been exhibits in the past that were more character related and we wanted to be a little more personal," she says. As a result, Henson's lesser known work is displayed alongside familiar fuzzy faces, including footage from his extensive work in commercials and his experimental films.

Because Henson's early work is something that the general public might not know much about, many mistakenly believe that his most famous character, Kermit the Frog, originated on *Sesame Street*. "People are always surprised when they hear that Kermit was first created in 1955," says Falk. "And he'd been around a long time before

**"Kermit was created in 1955 and had been around a long time before Sesame Street."**



*Sesame Street*." She says that an emphasis on those early years allows us to better see where Henson was coming from, and provides insight into his visual thinking and creative process.

Henson initially came to puppetry because of a desire to get into television. He ultimately got his start when he came across an ad for a children's television show that was looking for young puppeteers. "So he went to the library and got some books about how to make puppets, and made some puppets, and auditioned and got the part," explains Falk. "He recognized immediately how powerful puppets could be on television, because if you take away the puppet theatre, the proscenium as it were, the television screen becomes your proscenium." She adds that "Henson was really the first person to embrace the television camera as a medium where puppets would work really well."

Previously, puppets used on television tended to be stage puppets like Burr Tillstrom's for the early television show *Kukla, Fran and Ollie*. Puppets like Tillstrom's were generally performed behind a stage, much as they had been in theatre and vaudeville. But Henson came to puppetry without preconceived ideas about what puppetry was, or should be.

Henson recognized that television as an artistic medium could be hugely versatile for the performance and filming of puppets, but that he needed puppets that could stand up to a close-up. Puppets like Kukla and Ollie had a hard face and couldn't move their eyes or their mouths, and marionettes, like those of Bil Baird, don't move in any kind of natural way and are therefore unable to engage the camera the way a human face does.

But Henson created his early puppets from soft fabrics.

Falk says that the early Kermit the Frog was, in a sense, sort of a glorified sock puppet. "The fabric was stretched over Jim's hand without any padding or anything and so every little movement of his knuckle changed Kermit's expression. It was very effective on television and it made the characters really come to life for audiences."

For the first time, people could connect with puppets on television as though they were "real" actors.

And while Henson had been successful in his work with television commercials, he had a desire to try different techniques in film. In 1964 he produced *Time Piece*—a roughly nine-minute short film that was nominated for an Academy Award for Best Short Film in 1965. The piece, which is available for purchase on iTunes, underlines Henson's visual thinking and the fact that he was very much an image person, one who was also aware of how sound and music can enhance a story. In fact, the exhibition features a video in which Henson's original storyboard images for *Time Piece* and the film itself are played side by side to further illustrate the point.

In 1968 Henson produced an hour of programming for the Sunday afternoon television series *NBC Experiment in Television*—an anthology series in which a budget was given to various filmmakers to create an hour of television. Henson made a documentary, called *Youth '68*, that explored youth culture, the generation gap, and a changing America. He called the production a "collage"—as it consisted of images, quotes and even interviews with rock groups Jefferson Airplane and the Mamas and the Papas. The following year he produced a drama for the series called *The Cube*, about a man trapped in a white cube with visitors dropping by.

But of course, we love him most for his Muppets, especially Kermit, who was the clearest extension of Henson's personality. "Jim always said the Kermit was the character he felt closest to," says Falk. "Kermit was very much the center of things—the way Jim was—but not necessarily in control of all these people. Jim was an amazing gatherer of talent and he recognized talent in people and brought them into the fold and let them do their own thing—and Kermit of course does that very much in *The Muppet Show*."

Kermit was a very simple design, according to Seattle-based puppeteer Annett Mateo. "It was green, with eyes, and that was about it. But Henson was able to make that be so expressive because of his manipulation of the puppet and of course, the huge personality."



Drawing courtesy of The Jim Henson Company. © The Muppets Studio, LLC.

Henson incorporated volumes of notes and sketches into colorfully illustrated proposals that he submitted to agents, producers and networks. This jazzy hipster, Mahna Mahna, was featured in his television work.



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The whimsical nature of Henson's ink-and-marker-on-paper sketches of the Frackles for a 1970 television special is inherent in all of his work and evident in the world of *Fraggle Rock*.

## "We wanted to give people first-hand experience of how difficult it is to make a puppet look animated."

The EMP|SFM commissioned Mateo to design and build puppets for a special Seattle-only component to the retrospective called "The Mudgarden Experience." Conceived of by Margie Maynard, the Director of Education at EMP|SFM, the Mudgarden intends to educate people about what is involved in the process of putting on a puppet show for television. "We wanted to give people first-hand experience of how challenging it is and how difficult it is to actually make a puppet look animated, and look like it's playing a musical instrument, or talking or singing, and relating to humans or to one another," she says.

The Mudgarden is comprised of a puppet rock band made up of familiar Pacific Northwest rock icons like Jimi Hendrix, Kurt Cobain and Carrie Akre. But Mateo notes, with the playfulness one might expect from a puppeteer, that because they are Muppets, "Jimi Hendrix's skin is purple and Kurt Cobain's skin is blue."

Visitors will have a chance to manipulate the rock band while watching themselves on television monitors. "The whole idea behind the Mudgarden," says Mateo, "is that people get to pretend like they're filming an episode of *The Muppet Show*."

It's also, Maynard points out, a way to connect Henson's creation of the Electric Mayhem with the Seattle music scene, therefore drawing a straight line between Henson's interest in music and Seattle's own musical heritage.

Mateo says it's pretty hard to be in puppetry today and not be influenced by Henson, adding that he made puppetry accessible to a mainstream audience. Indeed, we continue to see puppets on television today, many made

by the Henson Company—including those seen on *Farscape* and *30 Rock*, and in *Forgetting Sarah Marshall*—or at the very least inspired by Henson's aesthetic, such as the innovative season five episode of *Angel*, "Smile Time."

Jim Henson's kindness, gentle nature and patience are legendary—and clearly this extended from his personal life to his work.

He experimented with the creative mediums of music, television and film artistically, but he also used them to communicate messages, bring people together, and teach children about everything from counting to getting along with your friends and caring for people you didn't even necessarily know. He taught us about respecting difference and about community. (In fact, *Fraggle Rock* was created with the intention of inspiring world peace.)

"Henson is such a beloved artist because he spoke to all ages and was entertaining for all ages," says Maynard. "Even if you were a little kid when you first experienced him, you see these things again and appreciate them on a whole other level, and are still charmed and delighted by it. It brings out the kid in you and that sense of using your imagination that we tend to lose when we get older."

Children who visit the retrospective will of course be charmed by the fuzzy and cute Muppets, and love them purely for what they are. Those of us who fall into the young-at-heart category can better see, through the images and footage on display, how Henson shaped our values, and our culture, and perhaps even inspired us to go out and use our imaginations to answer the question, "What if?" **geek**