

Kid vid

A survey of Canadian children's television programming

BY WYNDHAM PAUL WISE

I confess, I am a baby boomer parent of two young girls, three-and-a-half and five, and I have been recently inundated with TV for children. While I'm no child psychologist, nor an expert by any means, eight to 10 hours of *Sesame Street* a week, plus endless reruns of *Polka Dot Door*, *Sharon*, *Lois And Bram's Elephant Show* and *Today's Special*, has made me a connoisseur of sorts.

My kids live with television as part of their daily routine. By the time they reach the age of 12, they will have spent, according to Deborah Bernstein, former executive director of the Toronto-based Children's Broadcast Institute, 12,000 hours watching television - more time than they will have spent in school.

Clearly parents have reason to be concerned about the effect of all this TV time on the development of our children. But, equally clearly, we have reason to be proud and encouraged by the quality and range of Canadian television programs for children of all ages.

"Canadians are beginning to be recognized worldwide as one of the primary producers of children's television," claims Angela Bruce, the development head of Children's Programming at the CBC. She should know. The CBC regularly captures a phenomenal 99 per cent share of pre-school audiences across the country. Not only are broadcasters and a whole host of independent producers producing programming for children that is second to none, but children's programming in Canada is, for the most part, regionally based. This provides one of the strongest arguments for the very nature of our unique mix of public and private broadcasting.

From Halifax to Vancouver, Canada, with its small population base, has developed an extraordinary variety of children's programming. This bountiful harvest includes *The Blue Rainbow* (CHSJ St. John's), *Blizzard Island* (CBC Halifax), *Passé-Partout* (Radio-Québec Montreal), *Under The Umbrella Tree* (Noreen Young Productions, Ottawa), *Tree House* (CKCO in cooperation with Stratford's Children's Productions), *Romper Room* (CKCO Kitchener), *Mr. Dressup* (CBC Toronto), *Sharon*, *Lois And Bram's Elephant Show* (Cambium Productions, Toronto), *Degrassi Jr. High* (Playing With Time



TVO's Today's Special. "Research and attention to detail puts TVO in the forefront of children's programming"

Inc., Toronto), *Polka Dot Door* and *Today's Special* (TVOntario), *Kidsbeat* (Global, Toronto), *My Pet Monster* and *The Care Bears* (Nelvana, Toronto), *The Rockets* (CKY-TV Winnipeg), *Size Small Island* (CKND Saskatoon), *Harriet's Magic Hats* (Access Alberta) and *Fred Penner's Place* (CBC Vancouver). These programs entertain, inform, and educate.

By way of contrast, the United States, with its huge population base, has a very limited range of children's programming - from *Disney* to *Jem to He-Man* to the *Smurfs* and back to *Disney*. David Mintz, president of the Global Television Network, has a simple answer for this: "Television in the States has virtually one obligation, and that's to make money for its shareholders. Therefore, when television stations in the U. S. program shows for children, they feel no obligation to inform or educate. I've always felt that Canada couldn't exist in television without regulation. In the area of children's programming, I am happy to see that regulation has produced not only entertainment programs, but also many programs which are informing and educating." Ruth Vernon, director of Children's Programming at TVOntario, agrees, "It's the nature of public broadcasting in Canada that makes for the range and quality of children's programming."

Without knowing the first thing about the bizarre complexities of broadcast regulations, quotas, and the paranoia of foreign domination

to be found in this country's broadcasting industry, my two children would agree with Ruth Vernon. Their three favorite programs, *Polka Dot Door*, *Today's Special*, and *Sesame Street*, all emanate from TVO.

Sitting on a living room floor in Toronto in front of a television is perhaps not the most ideal place to conduct an informal survey of why Canadians do what they do so well in this area. But with a handy converter, and basic cable, it does provide one with the advantage of being able to view the greatest number of stations and programs to be found in any Canadian market.

For instance, one can view 43 hours of *Sesame Street* a week, courtesy of the CBC, TVO, and the PBS station out of Buffalo, which runs no less than four hours back-to-back on Sunday mornings. It is by far and away the most successful program of its kind and it is also virtually the only show for pre-schoolers that has been sold right around the world.

The Canadian connection here is a strong one. For many years now, the CBC has been providing the Canadian inserts that go into *Sesame Street*. They are currently producing 25 minutes of material a day for the show. This material comes from the regional affiliates and is assembled in Toronto. Angela Bruce explains, "We have our own Muppets and we take all the Spanish out and put French in. We identify our native people. We even sell back to the Children's Television Workshop (CTW, the

production company for *Sesame Street*) the French inserts so they can be used in other markets. We take out the strongly American messages and put in metric messages and the Canadian alphabet when it comes to the letter "z"."

There has been a lot of criticism of *Sesame Street* over the years - that it is too commercial in nature, too frantically paced, too aggressive, even that it is too "grouchy", although I personally think Oscar the Grouch is one of the *Street*'s greatest creations. Bruce defends the show. "The one thing I can say about CTW is the impressive amount of research that goes into anything new that they do. Every character on the *Street* has been very carefully studied and developed. Everything in life isn't bright and fresh, and I think putting "grouchy" in is a possibility and it's real.

"It's been produced in a commercial style because their research - and they researched it for three years before they produced their first product - found that kids watching TV at a tender age had developed a style of watching. They were attentive towards commercials, where things change quickly, and where the messages were short and to the point. They found that this was the best way to reach the viewer.

"But I've noticed that the whole pace of *Sesame Street* has slowed down. It's not as frantic and the inserts are longer. They don't come at you with the same rapidity. I personally prefer it. I think that the slower-paced Canadian product also improves what we get from *Sesame Street*. We are gentler in our approach and we have a softer sell."

This particular Canadian quality is evident in CBC's longest-running show for pre-schoolers, *Mr. Dressup*. Originally a partner with Fred Rogers, of *Mr. Rogers' Neighbourhood*, Ernie Coombs began as *Mr. Dressup* 21 years ago with puppeteer Judith Lawrence. Bruce's explanation for his success is very simple, yet puzzling to parents who are driven crazy by the slow pace of the show.

"It's his very personal presentation," says Bruce. "Each child seems to believe that Ernie is talking to them personally. It works very well in an intimate setting. It's almost going into your own living room. It is very gentle and very non-aggressive and Ernie is brilliant in understanding what the best ingredients are that make the show work so well with young kids."

The Corporation also programs for the older

Wyndham Paul Wise is a graduate student in the film department at York University. He joins the staff of Cinema Canada as the Toronto news reporter.

Television Programming

kids with *What's New?* (current affairs), which is in its 17th season, and the award-winning *Wonderstruck* (popular science). However, there has been some trouble with popularizing these programs. Over the years the Children's Department has been forced to program the 4 to 6 p.m. "strip" with anthology-style programming.

According to Bruce, it is not the way children watch television. "They get hooked on something and they'll be there. So we are working quite hard to change the anthology-style. We had *The Elephant Show* on Mondays, which is for the 6 to 8 year-olds, OWL/TV on Tuesdays, which is for 8-10s. Then on Wednesday we have *Wonderstruck* for the over-10s. Then on Thursdays we have *What's New?*, which is for the early teens. As a child, you have to remember how old you are and what you are supposed to watch. It doesn't work like that. Either they like a program or they don't. Either it's there or it's not. If not, they have a tendency to forget it."

The only real competition to the CBC in the area of children's television in the Toronto broadcast area is TVOntario. From TVO comes *Polka Dot Door*, the second-longest-running children's show on Canadian TV, and, incidentally, one of the most popular shows at my children's daycare. It's been running for 18 years now, every day, twice a day. The show's a success, according to Ruth Vernon, because it is the best targeted program aimed at 3 to 6-year-olds.

"A lot of parents hate it," says Vernon. "Let's face it, they consider it boring. We can always tell when our crews have children. Before they would complain that it is too slow, but then they would change. It's based on the child's own world, which is play. We give them ideas of how to play with toys, which are learning situations. The original concept came from the BBC's *Playschool*. We changed it a lot, but the idea of a story, of going through the door to the outside world with some sort of footage and songs, remains the same. We have sold it across Canada, but because of its similarity to *Playschool*, we have not sold it internationally." The frequent change of hosts doesn't seem to reduce its popularity. In fact, it demonstrates TVO's very effective research into what makes children's shows work.

Today's Special is another TVO production which has also proved tremendously popular with slightly older children. The research that went into the show prior to being put on air was exhaustive. Ruth Vernon explains, "The concept of the inside of a department store, the mannikin who comes to life, who represents the child, the woman who is the boss, the mouse who is the mischievous child, who gets into a little bit of trouble and who talks in rhyme, and Sam, the old security guard, came from Clive Vanderburg.

"We tested enormously. We brought children



Amanda Stepto (Spike) and Bill Parrott (Shane) in *Degrassi Junior High*. Series drew 1.2 million viewers when first moved to Monday evenings and is top-rated kids' show in Britain



Sharon, Lois and Bram's *Elephant Show*. "Performers who come closest to creating rock-star hysteria in the daycare set"

into our studios and we put our cameras on them. They all watched the program and then they were asked questions. The one thing that didn't work off the top was the character of Sam. He was a little too gruff on the first two pilots. That had to be changed. You could tell, the children pulled back from the screen when Sam

came on. Researchers, behind two-way mirrors, watched every minute. But since we felt that this was not quite a fair indication, we put the two pilots on air. We had certain sites around the province and we talked to parents and researchers after the airing.

"Of the two pilots, one was slightly more a

magazine format and the other more of a storyline. The storyline seemed to work better. So once all that was done, we had the money to get started with a number of shows, which is important for young children. By the time we went on air, we had 42 shows which allowed us 21 weeks before we had to go into repeats, and we were still producing. We eventually produced 120 shows and a one-hour special.

"We're not doing it any more. We are now working on a new pre-school show. *Today's Special* was costly and Clive was tired of doing it. He had done it for seven years. It had been his life. He was the producer, director, and he wrote most of the music. However, we will continue to run it. We keep getting new audiences. They keep coming in and going out the other end. It's been sold everywhere. It was Clive's decision right off the bat to go with Jeff Hislop. It was just the perfect choice. Jeff's was a fantastic contribution to the show's success."

TVO's research and attention to detail has put it in the forefront of children's production in Canada. It also provides a great deal of in-school programming, as mandated by the Ontario Ministry of Education. Unfortunately, this provides competition for the programming dollar within the organization. While learning-to-read programs like *Readalong*, which has been running for 13 years now, teaches youngsters and new Canadians how to read, it takes money away from quality at-home shows like *Today's Special*.

The other major networks in the Toronto viewing area, Global and CTV, predictably, provide considerably less programming hours devoted to children. CTV's flagship station in Toronto, CFTO, runs only one half-hour of *Romper Room* during its weekday morning schedule. The show, which comes from Burt Cluster Productions in association with CKCO, CTV's affiliate in Kitchener, is another long-running institution. However, it has none of the charm of *Polka Dot Door*, the gentle wit of *Mr. Dressup*, or the production values of *Today's Special*. "Miss Fran" works well with the children, but the show tends towards being "sappy". It's rather like being in school, which is to say that it is not much fun.

CKCO-TV is also responsible for *Oopsy Daisy*, starring a silly and somewhat patronizing clown named Oopsy, and *Camp Cariboo* (which won the 1987 Children's Broadcast Institute Award for Best Regional Programming), for older children. In addition, it produces *Tree House* with longtime Stratford performer Danny Coughlin. In fact, CKCO, along with CKY-TV in Winnipeg (*Magic Garden* for pre-schoolers and *The Rockets* for 6 to 12-year-olds), are the most active CTV affiliates when it comes to children's programming. CFTO produces none of its own at this point.

The smaller Global Network makes a more concerted effort for quality, although its choice of programming reflects the narrow range of commercial broadcasters. The one that Global

originates in its Toronto studios is *Kidsbeat*, which is now in its seventh year. Like CBC's *What's New?*, the 1/2-hour news and current affairs show is targeted for the 6 to 10-year-old age group. More recently the format has expanded to include music and entertainment. Without talking down to the children, *Kidsbeat* explains hard news and still maintains their interest. TVOntario picks up the show for second viewing, although Ruth Vernon says she had trouble with the inclusion of some of the rock videos. These have now been dropped from the format.

Global also produces a number of shows in association with independent producers or broadcasters—*Mr. Wizard*, science for older kids, with CFAC in Calgary; *Size Small Island*, an excellent pre-school show done in Saskatoon with the talented Lumby family in association with CKND; and *Blue Rainbow*, a pre-school program from St. John's, in association with CHSJ. However, the bulk of Global's children's programming is animated product from Canada's two largest animation studios, the Toronto-based Nelvana and Ottawa's Crawley Studios. According to David Mintz, "There are not very many animation studios left in the world. In the United States there might be five. In Canada we have two of the best. We have been able to foster in Canada the creative and technical skills, and both of the Canadian animation houses have had material on the U. S. networks."

Certainly Nelvana's production output is impressive. In the Toronto market alone, it provides seven hours of programming a week on Global. From *The Care Bears* to Lucasfilms' *Ewoks* and *Droids* to *My Pet Monster*, Nelvana has become an effective, and very successful, production arm for American product-driven, animated, hour-long commercials, which are sold as Saturday morning entertainment for kids. A lot of criticism has been leveled at the company for its aggressive commercial marketing, and its tie-ins with the Americans, but its product remains Canadian in the sense that it is much gentler than the American animated commercials, such as *He-Man*, *Jem*, or *Voltron*, *Defender Of The Universe*.

Maybe in an attempt to upgrade its assembly-line image, Nelvana's next project will be *Babar The Elephant*, both as a feature and a television series. *Babar*, a children's classic by Laurant de Brunhoff, is a sentimental favorite amongst parents of young children and many are anxious to see what the people who brought us the saccharine *Care Bears* and the *My Pet Monster*, will do with *Babar*. If Nelvana brings to it the concern and freshness which its earlier series *The Edison Twins* embodied, it should be promising.

French programming in the Toronto area includes TVO French, CBLFT (Radio-Canada), and some on TVO English. The most popular children's show is *Passe-Partout*, which has

become a ritual of growing up in Quebec. French Canada's answer to *Sesame Street* was created by Laurant Lachance 10 years ago. Developed by the Ministère de l'Éducation du Québec and produced by Radio-Québec, the provincially-owned TV network, *Passe-Partout* is carried nationally by CBC's French-language service.

Of the many independent producers working out of the Toronto area, several have committed themselves wholly to children's TV. Atlantis got its start with imaginative series, like the Oscar award-winning *Boys And Girls*, but have now moved on to adult programming and many other things. The young Cambium duo of Arnie Zipursky and Bruce Clawson have had great success with *Sharon*, *Lois And Bram's Elephant Show*, which has completed its fourth year of production. It has been named "Best TV Variety" by CFTA and "Best Children's Programming" by ACTRA. Undeniably, the success of the show is with the performers, who come closest to creating rock-star hysteria in the daycare set. *The Elephant Show* has recently been sold to Nickelodeon, which might provide the breakthrough in the American market that has so far eluded this excellent series.

At the other end of the age spectrum, *Playing With Time* is breaking new ground with *Degrassi Jr. High*, a dramatic series for teenagers. A natural growth from the very successful *Kids Of Degrassi Street, Jr. High* is now seen on prime-time on CBLT. Yet, it is still produced in the Children's Department of the CBC. This suits Linda Schuyler, producer, and co-founder of *Playing With Time*, just fine. "Our mandate is not to talk to adults. Our mandate is to talk to the adolescents and early teens. I think it is really important when you're producing a show that you have a really narrow fix on who your audience is. If we were to water it down to appeal to a broader range, then the adolescent will no longer feel that it is their show. That's why it is crucial that the show continue to be produced out of the Children's Department. There is a fundamental different sensibility from people who produce children's television and people who produce family television."

The first time *Degrassi Jr. High* was scheduled in the 8:30 p. m. time slot on the CBC, it attracted 1.2 million viewers. It has recently gone on air in Britain, with no promotion, and has immediately found success. Its realistic, no-frills approach to the subject matter has been a huge hit with British audiences and it is presently the top-rated kids' show over there.

Linda Schuyler thinks that the need for this type of teenage programming has been there all along, "but I don't think that there have been people wanting to tell stories to that age group. I think it takes a lot of courage on the part of broadcasters to put on the kind of material we are putting out. It's our feeling that the *Kids of Degrassi Street* really worked because we were speaking honestly to our audience out there, and we really treated our audience with respect.

Our feeling is that our audience out there is smart and very discriminating and want good, intelligent stories. We don't want to be sensational or do a sex show for teens. But if we were going to connect with those kids, we were going to have to talk about those things that they are discussing. So in the same show we could talk about wet dreams, the nervous anxieties of asking a person out for the first time for a date, or the anxiety of having to write a test. If we were going to be true to our audience, we would have to be given the freedom to talk about these issues. That's why we could never work with someone like Disney. There is just no common ground."

But parents beware, Mickey, Minnie, Donald, Goofy and all the rest of the gang is coming to town in the fall. At least 60 per cent of the new specialty pay-TV station, The Family Channel, will be programming from the Disney Channel. Morning programming for pre-schoolers will include *Mouseercise*, *Welcome To Pooh Corner*, and *Good Morning Mickey*. In the afternoon "strip" there will be more of the same, *Mickey Mouse Presents*, *Donald Duck Presents*, and, for variety, *Walt Disney Presents*. The Family Channel's 25 per cent commitment to Canadian programming will initially come in the form of reruns of *Matt and Jenny* and a new animated *Wizard Of Oz* out of Montreal. I can only hope that it is better than the dreadful *Wizard Of Oz* series from the Crawley Studios, currently seen on Global.

Susan Rubes, president of The Family Channel, and founder of the Young People's Theatre in Toronto, has a difficult job ahead of her. With all the new programming coming on basic cable in September as a result of the recent CRTC decision, there is bound to be confusion and The Family Channel might not be able to find its target audience. Images of the debacle of the last pay-TV decision handed down by the CRTC loom large on the horizon. "We're a specialty pay service, and not on basic," says Rubes. "One of our biggest selling points is that there will be no commercials."

YTV, on the other hand, will be on basic and will have commercials during its early morning, pre-school shows from 6-8 a. m. Then from 8-3:30 p. m. it will be commercial-free. YTV programming will consist of 30 per cent for pre-schoolers, 48 per cent for children and youth, and a maximum of 22 per cent directed at children and families. The service has been directed by the CRTC to provide no less than 60 percent Canadian content and not less than 60 per cent in prime time. In addition, YTV must devote not less than 10 per cent of its gross to the development and production of original, first-run Canadian programs.

Kevin Shea, president of YTV, and former v. p. of marketing for Rogers Cable Ltd., claims to have 3.5 million homes committed through the cable systems across Canada. Rogers, CUC and Cablecasting own 56 per cent of the company, in partnership with a consortium of

independent producers, headed by Jon Slan, who was formerly involved with SuperChannel before it merged with First Choice. YTV intends to be an entertainment, not educational, service, but it is encouraging to note that they will be picking up two of TVO's favorites, *Polka Dot Door* and *Today's Special* along with a variety of material from the CBC and CTV networks.

In Toronto there is the Children's Broadcast Institute, which maintains a library for research and acts as an adviser to the industry. It publishes a Directory of Canadian Children's Film and Video and holds biannual awards for excellence in children's programming. In Montreal there is the new Youth and Media studies at the University of Montreal which will "shame the industry into putting more money into quality programming for children", says Tom Axworthy, vice-president of the CRB Foundation, which has been created by millionaire Charles Bronfman. The foundation will also be providing funds for the production of high-quality shows.

Money, or, more properly, the lack of it, is the central theme running through discussions with all producers and broadcasters of children's programming. Angela Bruce of the CBC says that "It has never made sense to me that there's an attitude that children's programming should cost less. You pay the cameraman the same, the costume people, the writer—they're all union people. It doesn't cost less because the viewer is shorter. That's something that's been haunting us for years. But it's getting better."

So is TV for children, especially in Canada. My generation, which grew up in the '60s, fundamentally distrusted the message of television, and for good reason. Ironically, now these baby boomers are responsible for a resurgent growth of television in the lives of our children. Although still a major concern, the negative impact on children has become less of an issue. A generation of *Sesame Street*-literate kids have become TV-wise and schools are finally beginning to catch up with its potential to educate. It is a central part of our children's lives, whether we like it or not.

Again, Angela Bruce, "A few years ago there was a growing attitude that children should not be allowed to watch TV. Well, that's like forbidding your children to go outside. It's part of life. Forbidding them to watch TV is almost as dangerous as forbidding them to read. Television has become a substitute for books and theatre. Reading can be encouraged with TV, not discouraged."

With the theme music of *Sesame Street* running through my head, as it has been for almost five years now ("Sunny day, wishing the clouds away... Can you tell me how to get, how to get to Sesame Street?"), I can only be grateful that my children's television viewing is being watched over by committed and caring people like Angela Bruce, who have their best interests foremost in her heart and mind. ●