

Summer job blossoms into TV career

By Joanne Mallazewski
staff writer

BEING AT the right place at the right time was probably the best thing that could have happened to Lisa Simon.

"I had no qualifications. In my first year of college, I had a summer job that paid \$95 a week. My sister called and told me about another job that paid \$115. On my first day, they were test producing for 'Sesame Street'."

"At the end of the summer, I was asked to stay on. I had the nerve to say I would stay on if I could stay in the studio and work."

Her nerve prompted the start of a career that, after 18 years, has her billed as the producer/director of the renowned "Sesame Street" children's television show.

"I took one step into the studio and said, 'This is it,'" said Simon, a Detroit native before she adopted New York City as her home.

After getting her job with "Sesame Street," Simon quit college — learning on the job proved to be more productive. She later returned

to college, receiving a bachelor of arts degree in television. But she's quick to announce that her college education has nothing to do with her career.

AS PRODUCER, Simon is responsible for hiring and firing and working with the show's many writers. The show is actually produced only four months of the year. In the off months, Simon meets with the writers, holds production meetings and gathers the necessary props, actors and puppets that are required for the planned segments.

The studio and the actual production is the next step. That's where, once a week, Simon serves as the di-

rector, setting up cameras and working with the actors and their lines.

There's no denying, Simon said, the audience is in love with the animated characters — Big Bird, Oscar the grouch, Bert and Ernie and Jim Henson's famous Muppets, which visit about 10 days a year.

Some characters stay on the show and are successful, others aren't. But they are all intricate puppets with human manipulators. Inside Big Bird, for example, is a person who can manipulate the giant bird's movements and eyes. The person moves Big Bird with the help of a television monitor — inside the feathered character.

Bert and Ernie, the Cookie Mon-

ster and Oscar also are puppets with humans manipulating them either from above or below — with the help of television monitors. And it's done over and over again until it's done properly so there's no clue that the animated characters aren't as real as the show's human characters.

EVERY TRICK of the television trade is used to bring the animated characters to life. And the characters are used to emulate much that occurs in real life, Simon said.

In a takeoff of PBS' successful "Masterpiece Theatre," hosted by the late Allstar Cooke (i), "Sesame Street" offers a similar show, "Monstertopia Theatre," hosted by Allstar Cooke.

One segment, "The 39 Stairs" — with a character sitting calmly in a rocking chair, holding a book and explaining the monsterpiece episode — also emulates the late Alfred Hitchcock's screen mastery. In this segment, Grover is seen climbing up and counting 39 stairs. The short segment, using Hitchcock's mastery of angle shots and shadowing, zeroes in on Grover's stick legs climbing ever so carefully up the 39 stairs.

The goal of the show? Counting, pure and simple.

"Only Grover can get away with counting stairs and not be boring," Simon said, adding that the character's legs were moved from above with sticks.

'Sesame Street' Kids' show was 'bold experiment'

By Joanne Mallazewski
staff writer

He's the most lovable grouch on national television.

Perched in his characteristic garb, only Oscar can scowl and put his way into children's — and adults' — hearts.

"Okay, groucheteers. It's time to practice those grouch words," Oscar demands of the children awaiting the day's lesson. "Terrible, rotten, yucky."

But, oh no. An interruption comes along. A familiar animated horse tells Oscar to forget his grouchy words and try a new one — "abominable." "I'm sure it's perfect for talking about things you don't like," said the horse.

It takes some doing for Oscar to pronounce the new word. But he's soon got the kids — complete with little garbages can lids — repeating him.

The short segment is characteristic of "Sesame Street" — the television program that has become a household word for most American families — with or without children. "Eighteen years ago, 'Sesame Street' was a bold experiment," the show's producer/director, Lisa Simon, told an audience of about 30 parents Monday at the Farmington

'We need to know how kids learn, what interests them. We hope to be current and we hope to be progressive.'

— Lisa Simon,
'Sesame Street' producer

Hills branch of the Farmington Community Library.

SIMON WAS asked to help celebrate National Library Week, April 6-11, by giving parents a behind-the-scenes look into one of the country's most popular shows.

What made "Sesame Street" such a bold experiment when it began in 1969 was its now-celebrated and combined use of animation and human beings of various races, Simon said.

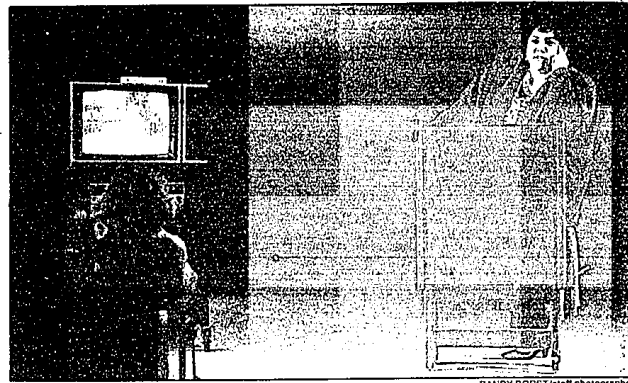
"We need to know how kids learn, what interests them. We hope to be current and we hope to be progressive," she said.

It is, however, the marriage between research and production that makes "Sesame Street" unique and a great success, Simon said.

Research is about as important as anything else on the show. The Oscar the grouch segment, for example, was tested — after it was aired — to see what kind of an effect it had on children.

Ninety children — groups of 3-, 4- and 5-year-olds — were asked to participate in a game called reporter. The kids were given reporter hats and asked to report what they saw and understood.

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Lisa Simon, a "Sesame Street" producer, discusses the educational television show

during a Farmington Community Library presentation Monday.

Farmington Observer

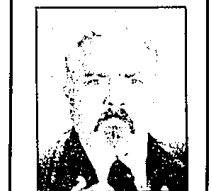
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