

World comes to Sesame Street for New Year's Eve

By SUZANNE GILL

"Sesame Street" by any other name? That would be "Sesamstrasse" or "Sesam Stasjon" or "Plaza Sesamo" or even "Rehov Sumsum." And it seems there are as many ways to get to Sesame Street, the 25-year-old entertainment and education series for preschoolers, as there are ways to say it.

Viewers can stroll Around the Corner and around the world in PBS' prime-time special "Sesame Street Stays Up Late! A Monster New Year's Eve Party," airing a couple of days and a few hours early on Wednesday, Dec. 29 (check local listings). Like other evening editions of the series, which have celebrated Christmas Eve and taught millions to put down the duckie (if they wanted to play the saxophone), this is an hour of family viewing worthy of saving on tape for new years to come. The Wednesday air date makes it possible for parents with New Year's Eve plans to share the show with their children ahead of time.

The special makes generous use of the series' new Around the Corner

set, an extension of the old storefronts and front stoops that adds a park, subway station, strictly-for-Muppets hotel and several new businesses to the milieu. The season's new faces - both Muppet and human - are visible, too. Viewers who haven't met Zoe or Baby Bear, or didn't know Ruth Buzzi now gets her laughs with kids, are in for some surprises.

It's unusual for "Sesame Street" to set a show after dark, but this is New Year's Eve. Several of the grown-up couples say goodbye and head out for the evening, but Gina (Alison Bartlett) and Savion (Savion Glover) stay behind to have a party with the kids. (Big Bird, after all, is still just 6).

While Telly worries, Snuffy takes a nap and the Count counts down the seconds until midnight, Elmo anchors a Monster News Network special report on New Year's traditions around the world. The first stop is Mexico, where Elmo's cousin, Pepe, and the visiting Rosita (a bilingual "Sesame Street" regular) report on the making and breaking of a holiday pinata. Additional reports are

filled from Norway (site of the next Olympic Games), Israel, Portugal, Germany and Japan. After each report, delivery man Grover brings Elmo a sample of good things from around the world, whether it's hand-made New Year's cards from Japan or a giant doughnut that rolls in from Germany.

"We wanted to show what it's like to be a kid in another country celebrating New Year's Eve," says executive producer Nina Elias Bamberger. "(We wanted to show) the games they play, the songs they sing, the food they eat and the wishes they make. The universal theme we're trying to convey is children having fun, celebrating friendship and peace."

The program was months in the planning and includes characters from five foreign "Sesame Street" productions. The Israeli segment, taped during Jewish New Year in September, features Oofnik the Grouch and Kippy the Porcupine. Kippy, who exemplifies the Israeli image of being hard on the outside and soft on the inside, is that country's counterpart to Big Bird. Though Japan has no national edition of the show, its NHK network collaborated on the Japanese segment, which features the debut of correspondent Elmonoske, Elmo's cousin in Tokyo. Puppeteer Kevin Clash, who plays Elmo, flew to Japan and Mexico to tape segments for the special.

To J. Baxter's Urist, senior vice president of "Sesame Street" producer Children's Television Workshop, the special is a natural step in the series' quarter-century evolution. "From the beginning, the program was intended to show children different cultures, so it's always had an international flavor."

To Bamberger's way of thinking, that makes "Sesame Street Stays Up Late" "truly a one-world production."

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