

Inside Big Bird and Outside Oscar the Grouch

A conversation with Caroll Spinney,
Muppeteer extraordinary. By Steve Rogers

For nearly four decades Caroll Spinney has been splitting time between Big Bird and Oscar the Grouch on *Sesame Street*. He has been with the program as muppeteer extraordinary since episode one, in 1969. *Sesame Street* has now produced 4,108 programs and is seen in 120 countries around the world. This interview was conducted on the occasion of Spinney's Lifetime Achievement Emmy Award by the National Academy of Television Arts & Sciences last Spring.

In 2009 *Sesame Street* and I will both turn 40. I was part of the first generation to grow up watching the show. That television experiment for young children has grown up and old along with us. Still, Big Bird doesn't look or seem a day over six and Oscar is timelessly tasteless. My three-and-a-half-year-old daughter Willow believes in them with as much unwavering enthusiasm as I did when I was her age.

Steve Rogers: What question are you asked most?

Caroll Spinney: Mostly I'm *told* what people like best about *Sesame Street*. They tell me how my work effects them,



Caroll Spinney (right) and friend.

what *Sesame Street* taught them. You know, when my daughter Jesse was three years old, she was sitting at the table and she looked up to me and said, “you know what? this table is a rectangle,” which I didn’t think was something that three-year-olds would just say, and I feel like *Sesame Street* was responsible for that.

SR: You started puppeteering at a very young age. Was that an extension out of an introverted childhood or the sheer wonder of make-believe or both?

CS: I was shy, yes. I guess if the word “nerd” existed back then, that’s what I would’ve been considered – even though I don’t like that word. So, yeah I had seen puppet shows. There wasn’t television back then. I saw one puppet show about the three kittens who lose their mittens, and you know it wasn’t that great. They were just kind of playing with these little hand puppets, but I thought how neat is that? So I got a hold of a puppet at a rummage sale and I had already had a green snake puppet that my mother had made for me. I put on shows and made

enough money to go to movies and have a penny left over for candy. And when I was nine my mother, unbeknownst to me, made me a whole Punch & Judy puppet show stage. She didn’t know it, but she gave me one heck of a career that day when she lay those puppets under the tree.

SR: Is it true that Jim Henson discovered and invited you to New York and *Sesame Street*?

CS: Well, I hadn’t tried out for *Sesame Street* or Jim. I was working in television in Boston at the time, but I wasn’t particularly inspired. I went to a national puppet festival because I wanted to be inspired by people who were trying really hard as puppeteers. The show I was putting on there was very elaborate actually, using animation with rear projection, but everything went wrong and yet Jim came up to me after the show and in his true fashion said, “you know, I really like what you were trying to do there.” That was typical Jim Henson. We really lost something when he died. He was a real, true genius. He could think in so many different directions. He could be managing 12 projects all at the same time and yes, you’d see him being quietly frustrated, but he was always a really nice and gentle guy on top of all of that.

SR: What changes have come to *Sesame Street* over the last four decades?

CS: Well, the budget thing became an issue for *Sesame Street* because we used to be supported by toy sales, but when so many new kid’s



The author’s daughter Willow with Rosita.

shows came on the TV, like *Teletubbies* and *Barney*, toy sales began to spread out, so we couldn't count on that to produce 110 shows a year, so it was reduced to 97 and then 50 and then they were going to scale back to 25 and someone said, "that won't work because there are 26 letters in the alphabet and each episode has to be brought to you by a letter. What are you going to do, leave one out?" So the producers said, "all right, we'll find a way to produce 26."

The other change I'd say is in the pacing of the show. The format is different today than when we first began. It's more segmented. It starts out with the story, which runs for five to ten minutes and then goes into the Letter of the Day and the Count and then back to the story and the end of the program is dedicated to Elmo's World, so yes, the show's formatting has changed as well and those changes were based on research the producers conducted with children.

SR: So *Sesame Street* continues to adapt for children?

CS: Oh yes, I'd say so. You know, in the 1940s people were citing studies about children and learning but they were actually using data based on white rats and not real kids. Well, they actually research the programming with real children at *Sesame Street*, and they take it very seriously. There was a character in the beginning that Frank Oz created called Professor Hastings and he would attempt to explain things to the children and in the process he'd fall asleep, well

it was hilarious, but it turned out that children were actually falling asleep along with him. So that didn't work, but we learn that way.

Marty Robinson, who plays Snuffy on

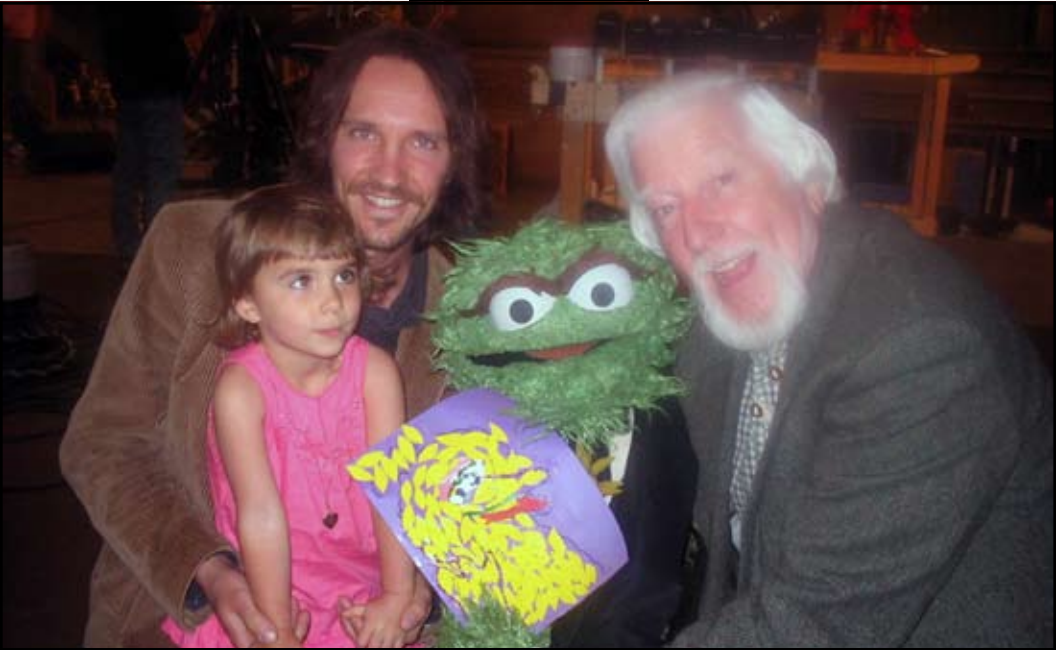
the show, was nine years old when his family suffered a divorce. So he came up with a story to help children understand it. Snuffy's parents are separating and, you know, Snuffy is

crying and everything, and he thinks he's the reason they're breaking up because that's what kids think, but when they tested the story on a group of children they were crying, even when it was all resolved and Snuffy was saying, "it's all right, Bird, I'll still be with my mom, and see my dad on the weekends, and everything's going to be ok," but the children were all still crying. The producers didn't buy it and they never ran it. The interest at *Sesame Street* is always in doing the right thing.

SR: Do you believe children have changed much or at all during your nesting on *Sesame Street*?

CS: Yes, sure they have, because the world changes constantly. You can just look at all the change in a 10- to 20-year period. Think of the change in the child's environment from say 1865 in America with the end of the war and the end of slavery to say 1900. It was only 35 years, but there was incredible change that effected children. Now look at the change from 1969 to present, 37 years later. So much has changed but particularly in the media. There's so much on television. So much of it is wonderful sure, but so

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(l. to r.) Willow Rogers, her father Steve, Oscar the Grouch and Caroll Spinney.

much of it is just awful. I like the show *Friends*, but I'm an adult, I'm 72 years old, so I understand it, but they show that program during the afternoons now, and so much of it is just all about getting their characters into bed. Would you want your child to hear all of that? I just hate to see children becoming too worldly-wise, using terms they don't even understand. Innocence, you know, is a precious thing.

SR: It's easy to overlook your other alter ego, Oscar the Grouch, but how much of the "dark genius" of the trash monster is the flipside of Caroll Spinney and why is he an important character to children?

CS: Well, Oscar's values are the opposite socially. I have to use my reverse computer with that one. Honestly, I'm often surprised at what he's going to say, but my mother and father were very funny and that's why it comes easy for

me, or for the puppet. I will say Oscar is a nice change after a day of being Big Bird. I used to suppose it was the same thing for Henry Winkler when he played Fonzie and he could just come out and "heeeey" and everyone applauded and loved him. To just be someone different than yourself, than what you normally are, when even really tough guys like and respect you. I had one big guy say to me once that he wasn't so much a fan of Big Bird, but he really liked the "nasty guy in the trash can" and he asked me to insult him. The only trouble I ever have with Oscar is when once in awhile I feel he's really being rude and getting away with it. That's when I stop and question what we are doing and if Oscar is doing the right thing, but I think it teaches kids that it takes all kinds in the world.

SR: Big Bird is, at least, in part responsible for making children feel as though it's okay to not know or understand their world in full. How important do

you think that is to the empowerment of kids?

CS: I think it's very important, yes. The original concept of the character when Jim brought me to the show was that Big Bird would be extremely goofy, but as we went on it just didn't feel right that this big goofy guy would hang out with kids, so we made him one. I raised my voice up a few octaves and we realized that what once sounded like a familiar television dinosaur on TV today, then actually sounded like a child. It worked. Yes he was eight feet, two inches tall but we gave him a child's view of the world and a childlike nature and kids responded to that.

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SR: What subject, confronted by the show and your characters, has been the most significant and rewarding?

CS: I think the death of Mr. Hooper was probably the most significant moment. You know, it was the most classic and incredibly moving. Everyone was crying, and you know I don't know if it is available as a comfort to someone, to children who are dealing with a death in their family, but it should be. We also did an episode when Big Bird has to go to the hospital and get some shots and he cried and Maria was a surrogate mother to him and I think it was very helpful to children and I understand that some hospitals still use it to help children cope. We also did a hurricane episode, which was aired after 9/11 and I think that was helpful and they

reran it after Katrina. It's important to connect to the lives children are having to live. It's so good to be able to do something that can be a comfort to them.

SR: What's wrong with children's programming today?

CS: I don't like a lot of the animation that is based on comic books. It's filled with battles and fighting and laser rays coming out of character's fists. They don't present solutions. Certainly violence is not the way to deal with things. Kids go right from *Sesame Street* to *Power Rangers* and characters saying things like (with a deep tone) "I will control the world!" I don't care for that at all. I also don't care for

a lot of what goes on on the Cartoon Network. I don't know who they are programming for, children or adults. I have a

feeling it's more for adults who want to watch cartoons, but kids are watching because it is cartoons. Over-all there's too much wiseguy stuff going on on those shows.

SR: What's right with it?

CS: Apart from *Sesame Street*, I like the show *Jakers* very much. I think it's a wonderful program because it teaches lessons. I appreciate any program like our show that is constantly looking to see what worked. Our audience is getting younger and younger. Look at Elmo, he's a three-and-a-half-year-old—a talented one at that, why, he can even play the violin, but originally *Sesame Street* was geared for children as old as eight. The problem was that we were losing them



Spinney accepting his Lifetime Achievement Award at the 33rd Annual Daytime Emmy Awards Creative Arts Ceremony.

before they got that old, so the show has adapted to a younger audience. I also like that *Sesame Street* stays fresh. Some shows are just so redundant and should probably be replaced with newer and brighter ones. But as far as what is right on TV, you know as a father that you're ultimately responsible for what your daughter sees. Your child is going to discover the world. What world she discovers is up to you.

SR: Much has been said about your longevity. How do you physically and creatively keep up the strong work year in and year out?

CS: I can keep up with it because I've gotten to know my characters inside and out, literally, and the writers work very hard. They're very good at what they do. They're tuned in and work sometimes for months on certain episodes. And the physical work is good for me because it keeps me in shape. I'm looking forward all the way to our 40th year. I will leave when I can no longer hold the bird's head high.

SR: Do you have any sense for whether or not Big Bird will carry on after you decide to hang up the beak?

CS: Oh sure, I'm sure he will carry on. When we lost Jim, you know, Kermit and Ernie went on and always will. I feel the same about Big Bird, someone else will carry on.

SR: I'm assuming you've told Big Bird and Oscar about the Lifetime Achievement honor you've received. What was their reaction?

CS: Oscar said, "I didn't deserve it." Big Bird said, "Whats that?" You know, though, the two of them, they don't know me very well. It might sound like multiple-personality stuff but a lot of the humor is based on what someone else says to them, reacting to other people. Sometimes Oscar just glares at me. I'm intimidated and I stammer to answer him. But he really has a heart of gold. He wouldn't want anyone to know that, so he hides it, but he really does have a heart of gold. On the other hand, Big Bird is all heart.

Steve Rogers is a writer, journalist and filmmaker living in Red Bank, NJ. He has been the chief correspondent of the Emmy® Awards for the last four years. He is also the Manager of Systems and Content for the Daytime Emmy Awards, and is currently directing a documentary about the state of New Jersey.