



The Muppets in Movieland

by JOHN CULHANE • NEW YORK TIMES MAGAZINE • JUN 1979

Last autumn, when Edgar Bergen died, and his voice and the voices of Charlie McCarthy and Mortimer Snerd were stilled forever, the great ventriloquist's widow, Frances, and his daughter, Candice, asked Jim Henson and Kermit the Frog to say a few words at the funeral.

"There seems to be something strange about having a puppet in this situation," began tall, lean, 42-year-old Henson, the brown-bearded, gentle-voiced, ever-calm creator of The Muppets.

"I've never appeared at a funeral before," said the hand puppet frog on Henson's hand.

"But the family asked me if I would bring Kermit and..."

"Charlie would have liked it," Kermit interrupted Henson — and only then did it sink in for some that Charlie and Mortimer were gone, too.

"I think of all these guys as part of puppetry," Henson told the mourners. "The frog here — and Charlie and Mortimer — Punch and Judy — Kukla and Ollie. It's interesting to not that there have been puppets as long as we had records of mankind. Some of the early puppets were used by witch doctors — or for religious purposes. In any case, puppets have often been connected with magic.

"Certainly, Edgar Bergen's work with Charlie and Mortimer was magic," Henson said. "Magic in the real sense. Something happened when Edgar spoke through Charlie — things were said that couldn't be said by ordinary people...We of the Muppets, as well as many others, are continuing in his footsteps. We're part of the cycle. We take up where he left off — and we thank him for leaving his delightful legacy of love and humor and whimsy."

In appreciation, Frances and Candice Bergen gave Henson a photograph of Edgar and Charlie that they set in a silver frame. The frame is engraved: "Dear Jim — Keep the Magic Alive."

This spring, Henson set that photograph on the mantelpiece facing him in his new office. The office is at the top of a four-story oval staircase in the Manhattan mansion that Henson had just bought to use as the United States headquarters of his rapidly expanding Muppet empire. For the magic is alive and thriving. Puppetry — the art of manipulating inanimate objects — has not been so popular in the United States (nor so profitable) since the heyday of Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy.

Indeed, no puppets in the history of the world have achieved the global popularity of Henson's Muppets. Puppet shows are found in almost every civilization and in almost all historical periods. The ancient Greek historian Xenophon mentions one in the 5th century B.C. and a 17th-century Chinese scroll shows children playing with marionettes. Pulcinella, a human character in the Italian *commedia dell'arte*, began to appear as a puppet on stages in the 17th century. Around the time of the French Revolution, national puppet heroes displaced the descendants of Pulcinella: in France, it was Guignol; in Germany, Kasperle. But in places where Punch and Judy, Kukla and Ollie, Kasperle — and even Charlie McCarthy — are unknown, Kermit the Frog and Miss Piggy are easily recognized.

"The Muppet Show," which begins its fourth season in September, is the top syndicated television program in the United States, according to a Nielsen analysis. It has some 235 million television viewers in 102 countries. Significantly, more than half of that audience is estimated to be adult (75 percent in Britain).

Millions of these fans are buying Muppet merchandise — making Henson and his wife and partner, Jane, millionaires through the international franchising by Henson Associates (letterhead: ha!) of puppets, toys, dolls, books, apparel, jewelry, household items, art objects, record albums, a \$17.50 Harry N. Abrams art book called "The Muppet Show Book," a Miss Piggy Doll that will debut this summer and, for 1980, a calendar in which Miss Piggy will re-create in color photographs a dozen of the roles made famous by other international sex symbols.

This summer, "The Muppet Movie," their first feature film, will play on theater screens in the United States and abroad. "The Muppet Movie" is the reverse of "The Muppet Show," said Henson, who created his first puppet in 1955 as a student at the University of Maryland. "On the television show we invite one guest into the world of the Muppets. In the movie, we are taking the Muppets out into the real world."

Henson may see all this as continuing in the footsteps of Edgar Bergen, but in many ways he is much more reminiscent of Walt Disney. At least, the externals of his business are beginning to take on a Disneylike aspect.

"I'm slightly uncomfortable with all the people who want to say things like that about me," Henson responded to the comparison, "cause I like Disney, but I don't ever particularly want to do what he did. He built this great, huge empire. I'm not particularly inclined to do that. You get that large a thing going and I'm not sure that the quality of the work can be maintained." He smiled sheepishly. "It seems that I'm bigger now than I thought I would be."

In fact, Henson is bigger now than he thinks he is. In discussing his situation recently, he said he thought he had "between 40 and 50" employees. In fact, since the success of "The Muppet Show" became obvious in 1977, Henson Associates has expanded from 28 full-time staff members to 71. There are now 11, rather than 6, puppeteers. There are now 30 designers, builders, and other artisans who work in the Muppet workshop (there were 12 in 1977). And, most significant, 30 people are now involved in administration (there were 10 in 1977).

Walt Disney Productions in the 30's was only a little company in which Walt Disney ran the creative end; his brother, Roy, ran the business end, and an attorney named Gunther R. Lessing did their legal work. Henson Associates, too, is run by a triumvirate. Henson is free to control the creative end, he said, because of working with lawyer Al Gottesman and producer David Lazer, a former I.B.M executive. "The two of them run the business side. It's wonderful for me."

"I like creating different worlds of puppet characters," said Henson, when the Muppets were already a unique world of puppets with very definite personalities. Today, Kermit and Miss Piggy are as much stars in their own right as Mickey Mouse and Donald Duck. Indeed, when Oscar-winner Rita Moreno appeared on "The Muppet Show" in 1977, she won an Emmy for "outstanding *supporting* actress in a variety or music program."

Whether there will ever be a Hensonland or Jim Henson World, his achievement as creator of entertainment of global appeal and as a highly ingenious merchandiser of this wares already reminds even artists who worked with Disney on the Mickey Mouse films of their legendary boss.

"Kim loves what's going on here this week," said Jerry Juhl, in Hollywood. He is head writer of "The Muppet Show," and co-writer with Don Hinkley of "The Muppet Movie," and an hour-long CBS, special "The Muppets Go Hollywood," which celebrates the completion of their first movie.

We were standing out by the pool of the Ambassador Hotel, watching Miss Piggy being filmed for the special as she reclined on a chaise longue — a tad overweight, but with light blue eyes to die for. Henson wandered over to see if towels draped over the chaise completely hid puppeteer Frank Oz from the camera. Oz was lying flat on his back on the pool deck underneath Miss Piggy, operating his *cochon couchant* through a hole in the *chaise*.

"This is one of the craziest weeks I've ever lived through," said the 40-year-old Juhl. "The Muppets have just finished taping 'Sesame Street' back in New York for the start of its 11th season next fall. Then they flew out here. On Monday, Kermit substituted for Johnny Carson as guest host of the 'Tonight' show, and they all entertained there. All week, we've been rewriting and rehearsing — and redecorating the Cocoanut Grove — for the party Jim's giving on Friday. That's tomorrow night! A huge guest list — some of the biggest stars in Hollywood — will be showing up. And in the midst of that party, while the Muppets are entertaining all these celebrities, we're going to shoot this hour-long television special."

"The PA's [production assistants] are running around screaming, 'How are we ever going to do this?' And Jim is wandering around in the middle of it all, perfectly calm, perfectly content," Juhl went on. "You go to him and ask, 'How's it going?' And he says, 'Oh, fine. There were hardly any airplanes overhead when we filmed Miss Piggy by the pool.' He's just like Kermit — if 'The Muppet Show' had a basketball team, the score would always be Frog 99, Chaos 98."

But Frog wins — perhaps because Henson takes for granted his offbeat but amazingly effective organizational abilities in evaluating the Muppets' popularity. His eye is on the essence.

"It's been a topic of conversation among our people as I try to zero in on what's important," Henson told me. "And I think it's a sense of innocence, of naiveté — you know, of a simple-minded young person meeting life. Even the most worldly of our characters is innocent. Our villains are innocent, really. And it's that innocence that I think is the connection to our audience."

Innocence is certainly the essence that unifies "The Muppet Movie." The story is amiable nonsense — a Muppet sendup of the American Dream as we humans dream it. Miss Piggy is first seen winning the Bogen County Beauty Pageant, a feat made plausible by the fact that the only judges are the late Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy, in their last screen appearance.

When Miss Piggy fixes her famous light blue eyes on "Kermie — my frog" (she is the only major Muppet with irises — and they have highlights), it is one-sided love at first sight. She bursts into a Paul Williams love song. "Never Before, Never Again," that fits her piggy falsetto as snugly as "Evergreen" fit Streisand's voice.

The conflict is a sly little satire on America's fast food fixation: Dog Hopper (Charles Durning) caricatures Colonel Sanders as effectively as he terrifies Kermit with his growing chain of frog's legs joints. There is also a Mad Scientist, played by Mel Brooks. But the Muppets prevail, because they are fueled by the kid of star-struck devolution to the American Dream that is epitomized by the rise from the swamps of Georgia to the swamps of Hollywood.

Mississippi-born Henson understands the dreams of a young frog from the provinces because he's been there himself. "The most sophisticated people I know — inside they're all children," said Jim Henson, father of five. "We never really lose a certain sense we had when we were kids."

The child inside Jim Henson was born in the rural South during the Great Depression — Sept. 24, 1936. He always had a vivid imagination, taking delight in the names of things and of people — such as his grammar-school classmate in Leland, Miss., a kid he lost track of called Kermit Scott. (Dr. T. Kermit Scott, Henson will learn if he reads this article, is now a philosophy professor at Purdue University in Lafayette, Ind.) And in those days Henson liked to imagine the way that Edgar Bergen and Charlie McCarthy and Mortimer Snerd must look as they cracked jokes over the radio with big Hollywood stars.

"Bergen goes back longest in my memory," said Henson of his fellow Scandinavian-American. "But I wasn't thinking of any of those people as puppets. They were human to me."

Time magazine, in putting Bergen and McCarthy on its cover when Jim Henson was 8, said that Charlie was "probably more human to a larger number of people than any inanimate object in history. It takes only the mildest indulgence in the world of fantasy to be persuaded that Charlie...is actually alive."

It is Jim Henson's historical distinction to be the first to adapt the ancient art of puppetry to the 20th-century medium of television. (Burr Tillstrom and the Bairds had originally developed their own art for puppet theater, not for the screen.) And because of television's commonly recognized power to reduce the world to a global village in a way that radio — owing to the language barrier — cannot, it is now the Muppets who are more human to a larger number of people than any inanimate object in history.

Appropriately, the advent of television was the biggest event of Henson's adolescence. "My mother told me I drove 'em all crazy until they bought a television set," he said. "That was in seventh or eighth grade, when I was 13 or 14 — about 1949. Burr Tillstrom's 'Kukra, Fran and Ollie' were on when we got our set. They were on half an hour every night about dinner time. They made an impression on me. So did Bill and Cor Baird's 'Life with Snarky Parker.'"

"Burr Tillstrom and the Bairds had more to do with the beginning of puppets on television than we did," Henson quickly pointed out. "But they had developed their art and style to a certain extent before hitting television. Baird had done marionette shows long before he came to television. Burr Tillstrom's puppets were basically the standard hand puppet characters.

"Janie and I own the company," said Henson. "We set it up that way in 1957, before we were married. We were married in 1959."

Those dates are correct, although Henson has been known to get confused about such dates as what year he created Kermit. "Jim hardly ever gets the past straight," said Jerry Juhl. "That's because he's completely future-oriented."

Nothing is better proof of this than Henson's gather of his team. In 1961, Henson saw Juhl and Frank Oz working together at the National Puppetry Convention on Carmel, Calif., and immediately realized their potential. Jane was pregnant with their first child, so Henson recruited the 23-year-old Juhl to take her place with the Muppets. "I was competent," says Juhl today, "but I never felt that I was a really first-class puppeteer. I thought of myself more as a writer."

Frank Oz was the first-class puppeteer, but he was then barely 17. So Henson waited patiently for Oz to grow up, finally recruiting him in 1964. Juhl was freed to write full time for the Muppets (Henson's instincts were right there, too. A script by Juhl, Henson, Chris Langham and Don Hinkley for "The Muppet Show" in which Miss Piggy — in a wedding gown designed by Muppet costumer Calista Hendrickson — almost tricks Kermit into marriage, won this year's Writers Guild award for the best-written television variety show.) And when Oz went into the army, Henson had a replacement ready: Jerry Nelson, an actor with a huge repertoire of voices, who had become a puppeteer by touring with Bill and Cora Baird.

In the 60's, the Muppets appeared regularly on "The Ed Sullivan Show," but they didn't become household words until the huge success of "Sesame Street" during the 1969-70 season — and even then their audience was primarily preschoolers. The Muppets' ability to make children remember letters, numbers and concepts has been clinically affirmed. But,

ironically, the Emmys won by “The Muppets of Sesame Street” in 1974 and 1976 for “Outstanding Achievement in the Field of Children’s Programming,” and the gold record for selling a million dollars’ worth of a Muppets children’s record, were setbacks to Henson’s original conception of the Muppets as entertainment for everybody. “They transcend all age groups,” he insisted to United States network executives. “Their satiric comment on society seems to delight all ages.”

But none of the three major television networks in the United States wanted a series starring the Muppets. “They always said the Muppets were child-oriented and adults wouldn’t watch,” Henson recalled.

The entrepreneur who took the risk was England’s Lord Grade who invited Henson Associates to be his partners in producing “The Muppet Show” at his London studios for the five CBS-owned stations in the United States and for United States syndication and world distribution by his ITC Entertainment Inc.

“The Muppet Show” was the Muppet breakthrough: the American Guild of Variety Artists gave them its 1976 award as “Special Attraction of the Year: — not “special children’s attraction.” And Edgar Bergen himself agreed to appear on “The Muppet Show” with Charlie and Mortimer during the second season.

“The only reason some people still think of Jim Henson as a children’s entertainer,” Bergen told me in 1977, just before leaving for England to tape the show, “is because ‘Sesame Street’ is so popular. You know, I was offered juvenile hours on television and I turned them down because I didn’t want to be identified as a children’s entertainer. Audiences of all ages believe in both Charlie and Kermit. My act and the Muppets are both sophisticated and adult, but children love them, too, because we give children a chance to use their imaginations. They complete the illusion that our characters start.”

“Basically,” said Henson, of his own puppets, “it all begins with those little sketches of characters that I or one of my associates make on people we know. They’re based on a personality type or an attitude more than anything else. I look at the sketches until one seems to have the whole quality of the personality. Then we begin building.”

When a Muppet face begins to express a personality, a puppeteer starts working with that new Muppet, to see how best he can communicate his or her personality through a voice and/or movements. On “The Muppet Show,” there are five first string puppeteers: Henson himself, Frank Oz, Jerry Nelson, and two who got all their training at Henson Associates: bearded Dave Goelz, 32, and Richard Hunt, at 27 the youngest of the group.

“Frank Oz is responsible for much of what’s funny about the Muppets,” says Henson, but in fact the best comedy seems to come from the peculiar chemistry between the exuberant Oz and the more subdued Henson. “Frank tends to overdo a part and Jim tends to underdo a part,” says Jane Henson; yet, together, they strike a funny balance.

Oz is also responsible for the first puppet Superstar since Charlie McCarthy — the complicated Miss Piggy.

“I remember that Miss Piggy used to be, in the very first year of the show, just a nondescript pig puppet that we had originally used prior to “The Muppet Show,” in a half-hour pilot called “Sex and Violence,” said Oz. “There was a bit in that pilot with a whole bunch of pigs and she was just one of the pigs. But in one rehearsal, I was working as Miss Piggy with Jim, who was doing Kermit, and the script called for her to slap him. Instead of a slap, I gave him a funny karate kit. Somehow, that hit crystallized her character for me — the coyness hiding the aggression; the conflict of that love with her desire for a career; her tremendous out-and-out ego — all those things are great fun to explore in a character.”

Since the Muppets are a team effort, others also explore Miss Piggy’s surprisingly deep personality. Back in New York, in the Muppet Work Shop, Calista Hendrickson dressed Miss Piggy from a drawer labeled “POSSIBLE PIGGY.” It is filled with fabrics from secondhand shops plus clothing that the costume designer’s children have outgrown.

“Jim feels strongly that the clothes not be so strong that they take away from the character,” said Calista Hendrickson. “But I think clothes can add a dimension to the personality. For instance, Miss Piggy’s not aware of the fact that she’s overweight — she dresses as if she’s 30 pounds lighter. So she has a lot of fantasy.”

Frank Oz explained: “The tremendous advantage of doing a series of 24 shows a year is that you have all that time to develop a character. And although Miss Piggy’s essentially humorous, to me she’s had a sad, difficult, painful life. This is not for the audience to know, but the puppeteer should know the background of any good character in order to be able to improvise.”

Oz wrote a four-page Stanislavskian analysis of Miss Piggy’s life and hard time and shared it with head writer Juhl. The essence of it, says Oz, is that “she grew up in a small town; her father died when she was young; her mother wasn’t that nice to her. She had to enter beauty contests to survive. She has a lot of aggressiveness, but she needs a lot to survive — as many single women do. She has a lot of vulnerability, which she has to hide, because of her need to be a superstar.”

“Oh, Danny, Danielle,” Miss Piggy recently cooed, after singing “Cheek to Cheek” with Danny Kaye, “why did *vous* want to do this particular song *avec moi*?”

“I heard you sing it once before,” Kaye answered, “years and years ago, when you were thin.” The hurt conveyed by Miss Piggy’s posture as she received his answer was an awesome achievement in the art of puppetry. Somehow, without her speaking a word, we could almost see her think and feel — and take his insult like a karate chop to the heart.

“Remember,” says Henson, “an actor has an enormous range of expressions on his face, but most of the Muppets can only open their mouths. So the angle at which the head is held, how it’s moved in relation to the body, or where the puppet is looking creates the expression. It’s in the way you hold the puppet. Five degrees of tilt can convey a different emotion.”

Miss Piggy's emotional range may be the broadest of any puppet in history. In fact, at her best, she may be the first round character in puppet history — in that she is capable of surprising audiences in a convincing way.

Indeed, the day may be coming when adult audiences will weep over the fates of puppets as Disney caused them to weep over the fate of cartoon characters in "Snow White" and "Dumbo" and "Bambi."

If it's possible with puppets, Henson will probably try it. "Jim's passion," said Jerry Juhl, "is to push the art form as far as he can," and Henson's next project will be his most daring use of puppetry so far. He refers to it only as "the fantasy film" and will say of it only that there will be no humans in it and that "it will derive from the vision of Brian Froud," illustrator of "The Land of Froud" and co-illustrator of the Abram's bestseller "Faeries."

Meantime, money rolls in from Muppet merchandise — though no one will say how much — nor need they, because Henson Associates is a private company. When CBS's "60 Minutes" devoted a segment to "The Muppet Show" last March, Henson said that he would rather not have the coverage if it meant talking money, because "that's not what the Muppets are about. Indeed, we do earn money and we like to be successful and profitable, but the Muppets are there for creative purposes and to entertain people." Nevertheless, he did concede that they "probably" made millions. "It's not what matters to me, it's not where I put my attention," he added.

This may be true enough, but it does not mean that commerce is neglected at Henson Associates. Seventeen countries now have active Muppet licensing programs, including 18 top manufacturers (Arista Records, Hallmark Cards, Fisher-Price Toys, etc.) in the United States. Of course, these revenues do not go to Henson Associates alone. The company splits with Lord Grade on a 50-50 basis. Grade's company (ITC) participates in the licensing of the characters on "The Muppet Show." And Henson Associates furnishes characters to "Sesame Street" for a fee. All of these arrangements make an exception for Kermit the Frog, who "pre-existed" "The Muppet Show" and "Sesame Street" and belongs solely to Henson Associates.

Beneath his controlled and guarded surface, Jim Henson seems to be trying to decide whether he will continue in the footsteps of Edgar Bergen and the young Walt Disney as master entertainers, or take the road that Disney took in the 50's — and become a modern media emperor. It may be significant that Muppet merchandise now refers to the characters as "Jim's Henson's Muppets," and that Al Gottesman says they are thinking of calling the Muppet mansion "Henson House."

It is certainly significant that Henson is voicing his concern over whether "the quality of work can be maintained" when an organization becomes an empire.

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So here was Jim Henson at the Coconut Grove, which he had redecorated for "The Muppets go to Hollywood" into an Art Deco dreamland. Tonight, the artificial coconut palms sheltered giant screens on which the guests would see an 18-minute condensation of "The Muppet

Movie.” Henson had come a long way to this room from the family parlor in Leland, Miss., its radio tuned to Bergen and Charlie in Hollywood.

Tonight, Miss Piggy would be introduced as “the newest of Hollywood sex symbols,” and she would be borne onto the dance floor by four muscle men, a la Mae West, with Frank Oz prone beneath her in the coffinlike couch, his right arm sticking up through the lid to keep her magic alive.

The show would begin late, and one number would have to be started over three times, apparently because technical people kept missing cues. But the number would finally be well received by many of the funniest people in Hollywood: Mel Brooks, Carl Reiner, Red Buttons, Kaye Ballard, Dom De Luise, Vincent Price, Dudley Moore. At last, human stars and Muppet stars would join a Conga line led by Rita Moreno which would be videotaped to form the climax of “The Muppets Go Hollywood.” At the end of the evening, the score would be: Frog 99; Chaos 98.

But before all this hoopla commenced, there was a quiet moment. Jane Henson had flown across the country that day with their eldest daughter, Lisa, who had left Harvard for the occasion. Back home in the big house in Bedford, N.Y., were Heather, 8 ½; John, 14; Brian, 15; and Cheryl, 17. Their mother hadn’t even had a chance to change into evening clothes yet, but she stopped into the Coconut Grove on her way upstairs in the hotel to make sure their father had everything ready.

Holding hands, Jim and Jane Henson walked slowly across the dance floor where Valentino danced the tango and Joan Crawford danced the Charleston and Scott and Zelda danced the Black Bottom and Chaplin did clog dancing and William Randolph Hearst and Marion Davies did the Waltz. For the length of that walk the Hensons looked like two children allowed to go downtown alone only if they promised to hold hands crossing busy streets.

“Inside, we’re all children,” Jim Henson had told me two weeks before, riding in a New York taxi to his new mansion on East 69th Street. “You know, everybody identifies with that feeling of looking around at this big world and not knowing who you are and what you’re supposed to be doing here.” These days, of course, Jim Henson seems to know exactly who he is and what he’s supposed to be doing here.

Yet that day in the taxi, beneath the controlled calmness of Henson’s conversation, one could detect an undercurrent of anxiety lest the unity that he and Jane have so carefully maintained over the 23 years of Kermit’s magical life be undermined, not by failure, but by a sudden flood of big successes.

“This coming year my family and I will move to England for a year,” he said. “I just bought a house there. We’ll do the next two seasons in London. I’ve been away so much. It’ll pull us together a little bit as a family.” Back in New York, he would leave much of his organization quartered in the mansion.

“I pretty much bought this place for the stairway,” Henson told me. “Our last location had offices in one building and the shop in another. When I saw this building with a great oval

staircase right in the middle, I said, 'That's just what I need, because I want to unify everybody.' And that the way it's working. Just running up the stairway to my office, I see six or seven people I normally wouldn't see..."

At the Cocoanut Grove, the quiet moment had passed. Jane let go of her husband's hand and went upstairs to put on a bright red, floor-length formal gown. Jim went backstage to put on a green frog in a tiny tux. Before they rolled the mini-movie, Jim and Kermit had an announcement to make. "We're dedicated "The Muppet Movie" to Edgar Bergen, who worked with us on it..."

Frances and Cady Bergen seemed pleased by that — and so would the child inside Jim Henson.