

MOVIES

'Sesame' documentary hits the 'Street'

Brian Trullitt
USA TODAY

"Sesame Street" didn't start with Big Bird, Bert and Ernie. It started with Joan, Jon and Jim.

Directed by Marilyn Agrelo, the documentary "Street Gang: How We Got to Sesame Street" (in theaters, on video-on-demand platforms Friday) — which premiered at the virtual Sundance Film Festival in January — offers a comprehensive look at the origins of the influential children's educational program (now heading into its 52nd season) beginning with TV executive Joan Ganz Cooney, writer and director Jon Stone and puppeteer Jim Henson in the late 1960s, how it became a cultural phenomenon, and its steadfast commitment to inspiration and inclusion.

The show "was so intentional and purposeful," producer Ellen Crafts said in a Sundance Q&A this year. "The creators of 'Sesame Street' were doing something in response to the civil rights movement and the disparity in education among children of color." The long-time program showed "how creativity and education can combine together to make change in the world."

Making "Street Gang," based on the Michael Davis book of the same name, was an opportunity for Agrelo ("Mad Hot Ballroom") to "tell a story that people think they know so well. I was really hopeful to tell the adult story of 'Sesame Street,' the struggles and the dreams of these people who came together.

"We don't think of 'Sesame Street' at all as political or earth-moving but it really was."

The documentary shows a bunch of the famous names who stopped by to see Oscar the Grouch, Grover and the rest of Sesame Street's crew, from James Earl Jones and Steve Wonder to Johnny Cash and Paul Simon. With behind-the-scenes footage, "Street Gang" lets audiences take a peek at the puppeteering comedy team of Henson and Frank Oz, but also digs into how it explained the death of Mr. Hooper to kids after actor Will Lee had a fatal heart attack in 1982, and even deals with the workaholic sensibilities and mental health struggles of the "Street" creators.

"This is a vast, vast story with huge



Puppeteers Jim Henson, left, and Frank Oz laugh with "Sesame Street" writer/director Jon Stone in "Street Gang: How We Got To Sesame Street." PROVIDED BY FROK FUHRING/SUNDANCE INSTITUTE

cast of characters," Agrelo said, so when making the documentary, she decided to focus on the first 20 years of the show.

"The origin is the most groundbreaking, the most experimental period of 'Sesame Street.' By reducing the vastness of it, we were able to make it stronger."

Making the movie opened "Sesame Street" in new ways for the filmmakers. Producer Lisa Diamond appreciated the very early decision to have the Muppets share the street on screen with their human neighbors when experts and educators initially argued that they shouldn't mix fantasy and reality. Having them separate was "boring," she said. "Jon's like, 'We're going to put them together,' and it was such a huge step."

Agrelo didn't really know that at the very beginning, "Sesame Street" was directly aimed at Black inner-city children ages 3 to 5. Ramifications came out of that, from public television stations in the South being resistant to the show's integrated cast to the rejection of Mup-



Puppeteer Carol Spinney and Oscar the Grouch, in "Street Gang." PROVIDED BY LUKE GEISSBUHLER/SUNDANCE INSTITUTE

pet character Roosevelt Franklin, created by actor/writer Matt Robinson to appeal specifically to Black kids, because of his vernacular. "It was the Black parents who didn't want to be pigeonholed into that stereotype," Agrelo said.

Producer Trevor Crafts just loves the multicultural aspects Stone wanted for

the Street itself, where all races and ages and genders can live together in harmony on an 8-foot bird walking around. "That's such an inspiring way to create a show for kids," he said, "to show the world the way you want it to be so they have that implanted in their earliest memories, that this is the way we're all supposed to be."

Agrelo directed segments for recent seasons of "Sesame Street" and she affirms that the Sesame Workshop still does a lot of research on issues such as social justice and homelessness. "To elevate to a higher thinking, to always have teaching (and) humanity in mind, is very much there," the filmmaker said. And watching Black Lives Matter marches and unrest in America in the past year "made me proud of this film because everything that was true in 1968 is true in 2021. We still have to open up our minds and our hearts, and this program is still very much a part of that."

PUZZLES

CROSSWORD
EDITED Erik Agard
BY Zhourig Burnikel

THE COLOR PURPLE

- ACROSS**
- 1 Game with a pack
 - 6 Feature of Aukwafina's voice
 - 10 Jujitsu practice
 - 13 "If only!"
 - 14 20th Olympics city
 - 15 "Where... they now?"
 - 16 Sweet-smelling shrubs
 - 18 Family cover
 - 19 Up to now
 - 20 Nostalgic song
 - 21 Peek at the answer
 - 23 Cause to giggle
 - 24 Some fire signs
 - 25 Alex Morgan's sport
 - 28 Far away
 - 31 Movie trailer, for example
 - 32 Motel unit
 - 34 Fawn's mother
 - 35 Scented packets in
 - 39 Grobbed down some goyoza, say
 - 41 In the past
 - 41 Cardiologist's specialty
 - 42 Wood-eating pest
 - 45 Proofreader's proof
 - 46 Some pens
 - 47 Audibly enjoy a bowl of ramen
 - 48 Strain cover
 - 51 Comedian name
 - 52 Japanese _____ (music style)
 - 53 Japanese money
 - 56 Boiled or steamed Christmas dessert
 - 59 45-degree angle
 - 60 Desert refuge
 - 61 _____ lauder
 - 62 Promgoers, speakers (Abbr.)
 - 63 Cookware for ramen
 - 64 Knight's horse

| | | | | | | | | | | | | |
|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|----|
| 1 | 2 | 3 | 4 | 5 | 6 | 7 | 8 | 9 | 10 | 11 | 12 | |
| 13 | | | | | 14 | | | | 15 | | | |
| 16 | | | 17 | | | | | | 18 | | | |
| 19 | | | 20 | | | | | 21 | 22 | | | |
| 23 | | 23 | | | | | 24 | | | | | |
| 25 | 26 | 27 | | | | | | | | 29 | 30 | |
| 31 | | | | | 32 | 33 | | | 34 | | | |
| 35 | 36 | | | | | | | 37 | 38 | | | |
| 39 | | | 40 | | | | | 41 | | | | |
| 42 | | | 43 | 44 | | | | 45 | | | | |
| 46 | | | 46 | | | | 47 | 48 | | | | |
| 49 | 50 | | | | | | | 51 | | 52 | 53 | 54 |
| 55 | | | | 56 | 57 | | | | 58 | | | |
| 59 | 60 | | | | | | | | 61 | | | |
| 62 | | | 63 | | | | | | 64 | | | |

DOWN

- 1 Lower on a floating pad
- 2 Cutesy word for a scrape
- 3 Lean
- 4 Org. with "What Can I Bring?"
- 5 You're not serious?"
- 6 "The Flight Attendant" actress Perez
- 7 Muscle pain
- 8 "Every Little Thing..." Does It Magic?"
- 9 Twelfth zodiac sign
- 10 Clinches a business transaction
- 11 Teatro Colon showstopper
- 12 Farmer's market structure
- 14 Body wash lather
- 17 Out-of-focus image
- 22 Like Hunan cuisine
- 23 Very top
- 24 Capital south of Bogota
- 25 Watermelon drop sound
- 26 Make a speech
- 27 Groups not known for playing originals
- 28 One capsule, e.g.
- 29 "Dame de Paris"
- 30 Ill-tempered
- 31 "Nightcrawler"
- 32 Monster in fantasy
- 36 Threes in an ellipsis
- 37 Game in which you act things out
- 38 Pitch in
- 43 School downriver from Harvard
- 44 Frozen snack on a stick
- 45 Spiritual guide
- 46 Round before the finals
- 48 People run them on tracks
- 49 Places with kettlebells
- 50 Back
- 51 Is required to
- 52 Search engine's find
- 53 Joint stretched in half loots
- 54 Cheddar
- 57 Language spoken in Talot So
- 58 Clock setting not observed by the Virgin Islands (Abbr.)

Tuesday's Answer
CROSSWORD ON YOUR PHONE
PUZZLES.USATODAY.COM

WORD ROUNDUP

- By David L. Hoyt and Jeff Krukak
- Find and Circle: Five facial expressions
 - Three six-letter birds
 - Three poker hands
 - Two dwarf planets
 - WHS: _____ system
- Tuesday's answer: GROWTH TOWN DOWN BOWL HOWL / GLOBAL POSITIONING SYSTEM / JUPITER NEPTUNE SATURN / ZODIAC CASH / BELGIUM

QUICK CROSS

By John Wilmes

Cinco de _____ (celebration)

Crude cartel

"Star Wars" antagonists

"Dynamite" singer Cruz

Greatest extent

Samoa capital

Cooler brand

Eight-in-a-Pull song

QUIK CROSS ON YOUR PHONE
PUZZLES.USATODAY.COM

SUOKU

Complete the grid so that every row, column and 3x3 box contains the numbers 1 through 9 (no repeats).

| | | | | | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|---|--|--|--|
| 2 | 9 | 8 | 3 | | | | | |
| | | 2 | 1 | 4 | | | | |
| | 3 | 7 | 4 | 8 | 9 | | | |
| | 3 | 1 | 7 | | | | | |
| | 3 | 1 | 6 | 5 | 8 | | | |
| | | | 5 | 8 | | | | |
| 9 | 2 | 1 | 7 | 3 | | | | |
| | 6 | 8 | 9 | 7 | | | | |
| 1 | | 3 | 2 | | 9 | | | |

SUOKU FUSION ON YOUR PHONE
PUZZLES.USATODAY.COM

To report problems, email feedback@usatoday.com. For more puzzles, get the USA TODAY Crossword app.

UP & DOWN WORDS
By David L. Hoyt and Russell L. Hoyt

1. TASTES

2.

3.

4.

5.

6.

7.

COURSE

Clues:
1. I yummy
2. Nice phizguc
3. Become stronger
4. California weightlifting spot
5. Frankie Jackson movie
6. Rebooted "Who's show" _____
7. "As expected"

Tuesday's Answer
FRESH
START
LATE
ARRIVAL
TIME
TO
GO
AWAY

PLAY ONLINE
PUZZLES.USATODAY.COM

TXTPERT

Across Down
2,7328 1,7323
4,227 2,736D837
6,7383 3,7835
6,72665 4,26447
8,790 9,7278
9,82739 7,278

Today's theme Classroom

Use the phone keypad to fill in the letters. For example, to enter the word "CLASS", tap C, then L, then A, then S, then S, then A, then L, then Y. The GO! button will solve the puzzle.

Use the phone keypad to fill in the letters. For example, to enter the word "CLASS", tap C, then L, then A, then S, then S, then A, then L, then Y. The GO! button will solve the puzzle.

DON'T QUOTE ME!

Author Richard Chab talks about change.

“ _____ THE _____ CALLS THE _____ OF THE _____ ”

Tuesday's Answer: "There's an English idiom, 'Stop and think.' Nobody can think unless he stops." —Herbert Asch

RECOGNIZE THE WORDS TO COMPLETE THE QUOTE.

BUTTERFLY CALLS CATERPILLAR END MASTER WHAT WORLD

“ _____ THE _____ CALLS THE _____ OF THE _____ ”

Tuesday's Answer: "There's an English idiom, 'Stop and think.' Nobody can think unless he stops." —Herbert Asch