

ELMO INTERVIEW (PUBLISHED THE GUIDE, COURIER-MAIL, 2006)

Today's story is brought to you by the letter S . . . for surreal. Interviewing one of the world's most famous puppets over the phone certainly qualifies as that. You know that the little red monster from Sesame Street isn't really holding the phone - instead it's his puppeteer Kevin Clash - but still, there's Elmo's childlike voice and you've been instructed to only ask questions that the eternally three-and-a-half year-old can answer in character. Doesn't make for an in-depth conversation.

Elmo was in Australia a few weeks back promoting the latest "Healthy Habits" season of Sesame Street. Now in it's 36th year, the children's favourite is tackling the obesity problem, the result being that Cookie Monster has turned over a new leaf. Surely this doesn't mean a name change to Carrot Monster?

"Cookie Monster still gets to eat cookies. It's just that it's a 'sometimes food'", Elmo reassures me.

And Elmo's favourite sometimes food? "Pizza, but Elmo also loves broccoli and corn."

At this stage, I note that Elmo and my four year-old daughter would have a lot in common because she also loves broccoli and corn, to which Elmo suggests they should have a broccoli and corn party. Hmm. . . don't know if it'll ever replace princesses and fairies.

We talk a little bit more about Sesame Street's emphasis on health and exercise and Elmo tells me he loves being healthy because it keeps his fur looking really clean - a benefit many of us can relate to. But I'm anxious to get to grittier subject matter . . . like politics.

Elmo and fellow Sesame Street characters are guest starring on The West Wing soon but the problem is that I've been instructed not to refer to it in such a way because Elmo apparently doesn't realise he's been on the show. Instead he thinks he met the real first lady, Abby Bartlet, played by Stockard Channing (who, incidentally, used to be a regular on Sesame Street decades ago!).

This logic is perplexing because celebrities guest star as themselves on Sesame Street all the time, which acknowledges the outside world. So, who are George W. and Laura Bush if Jed and Abby Bartlet are the presidential couple?

"Didn't you get to meet the president's wife?" I ask Elmo, referring to the episode where Abby gives Elmo a needle in a TV ad. "Well, Elmo actually went to the doctor's and got an immu-immunisation (mispronounced) shot," answers Elmo.

"Oh. So Mrs. Bartlet didn't come to Sesame Street to visit you?" I say, now getting totally confused about which fictional world we're supposed to acknowledge. "No, we went to her, te-he," is the reply.

I also ask Elmo about the little joke he has with Abby about whether she's still got her medical licence. What will this three-and-a-half year-old say to that? "Elmo doesn't remember, te-he," is the diplomatic reply. "But it was fun."

Sensing this isn't going to get any better, I finally put my four year-old on the phone. Maybe she and Elmo can have a meeting of minds. They do, and they say they love each other. Broccoli and corn party, here we come.

Vicki Englund