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The Man behind the Muppet

I've always admired Henson's muppets, along with their TV show, and feature films, as I'm sure generations of people have and continue to do; his world of puppetry played a hand in shaping my childhood. Though, only after watching this documentary, I've coming to realize how many projects he was truly a part of. And while he didn't decide to become a puppeteer, his art and talent and his belief in himself and the people he works with, made it all come together wonderfully. This 85-minute long film from the PBS show *Great Performances* mixes the history of Henson's projects with plenty of sketches that any fan age 3 and older should enjoy. It also includes some amazing video clips from Henson's early TV days, his commercials from the late '60s, as well as post-Sesame Street work that remains stunningly creative and beautiful. It truly highlights the soft-spoken genius of Jim Henson; he was intriguing, and his motivation was contagious to the people who surrounded him. It really is *The World of Jim Henson*.

It seems wild that his legacy started out as making puppets as a means of getting a job. Beginning in 1955 on "Sam and Friends", a skit-based puppet show for adults, he then established a recurring spot on The Jimmy Dean Show. This introduced Jim Henson, his colleagues, and most importantly, his muppets, to a national audience. By the late '60s, he was producing commercials that could have a tagline and produce a laugh in six seconds. Slowly, he was reintroducing puppetry into the mainstream and continued making the transition from the proscenium to the TV screen. Shows like *Sesame Street*, *The Muppet Show*, and *Fraggle Rock* all displayed his skills as a director of such large projects.

He, of course, mastered the art of puppetry and could run a gamut of emotions with a slight of his hand. However, Henson is quoted in the documentary, saying:

“...I’m not a ventriloquist and I don’t try to hide the fact that my lips move, but the truth of the matter is that the frog is a great deal more interesting to look at, and um... who notices what the bearded man is doing?”

Going even further, he created entirely new worlds in films such as *The Dark Crystal* and *Labyrinth*, branching into more serious directions.

The imaginative range of Jim Henson and his creations, such as bits from the aforementioned *The Jimmy Dean Show*; shots from his 1965 Oscar-nominated short, *Time Piece*; appearances on *The Ed Sullivan Show* and *The Tonight Show with Johnny Carson*; his explanation of Wall Street on *Nightline*; and Miss Piggy's comedic appearance on *60 Minutes*; makes his genius seem endless.

The special also includes interviews from those who remember him best--his ex-wife Jane, son Brian, friend and co-worker Frank Oz, and head writer Jerry Juhl. And, a surprising interview from film director Francis Ford Coppola, where he speaks about the genius of Henson’s directing style and work ethic.

Now, despite our great familiarity with his life’s work, Jim Henson did intend to pursue a more serious film career, that was not aimed at the child audience. There were a number of projects he did throughout and during his Muppet career, that were in the surrealist genre (listed above). However, these were seen as secondary to his life work, but from what his close friends in the documentary reveal, Henson saw it the other way around. He fully intended to break away from being pigeonholed as a performer for children.

He was always a creative person, but it always felt like he didn’t have enough time, even though, admirably, he never thought about stopping what he was doing. Jerry Juhl comments

that *Time Piece* is about a man who is running out of time; and that Jim seemed to know the reality that he would never have enough time for his projects or his personal life. The pressures of his career had a profound effect on the relationships with his wife and greatly limited the time he was able to spend with his children. Sadly ironic, for the man who was in the lives of children all over the world, he died at age 53.

The World of Jim Henson still lives on. So rather than thinking about what works he *himself* could have created in the years since his death, we can enjoy what has already been given to us.

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