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The Magic Toy Shop

Jean Daugherty

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The Magic Toy Shop

BY JEAN DAUGHERTY

TURN BACK to the closing months of 1948: Harry S. Truman had just confounded press, pollsters, and pundits by defeating Thomas E. Dewey for the presidency. On Broadway Mary Martin was busy “washing that man right out of her hair” as Ensign Nellie Forbush in the newly opened *South Pacific*. In that year an important event occurred in Syracuse. On 1 December WHEN-TV signed on the area’s first television station, after which life was never quite the same.

It was claimed that Channel 8’s hitting the air by December was a history-making event. The usual start-up time for a new television station was one year. But Central New Yorkers saw their first program sixteen days after the equipment arrived at the site, the old Cine-Simplex Building at 101 Court Street. The owners, the Meredith Corporation, publishers of *Better Homes and Gardens* magazine, felt that this was a good omen and that their decision to enter television had been a wise one.

The local press reported great interest in the new medium, in spite of the fact that most people caught their first glimpse of local television through the windows of a store: only about 100 people in the coverage area owned sets.¹ There were programs from 5:00 to 6:15 p.m. and from 7:30 to 10:00 p.m., although the test pattern was shown from 10:00 a.m. to 5:00 p.m. People were fascinated by the idea of pictures coming through the air. Progress was swift. Those 100 sets became 2,300 sets within three months. By early 1950 the number jumped to 50,000, and by the time the station was ready to celebrate its fifth birthday it was providing service to 400,000 sets.

I came on the scene in time for the birthday celebration. Television was still young; we were eager to try out new ideas—and idealistic enough to

Jean Daugherty received a B.S. in education from Indiana University of Pennsylvania and an M.S. in communications from Syracuse University. Since 1953, when she became a local public affairs programmer, she has written or produced more than 16,000 shows, including 6,200 episodes of *The Magic Toy Shop*.

1. According to Professor Emeritus Lawrence Myers Jr., the extent of a station’s coverage area depends upon such factors as the strength of the signal, the location of the transmitter, and the obstacles presented by the surrounding terrain. Most likely, WHEN reached homes within a fifty-mile radius.

believe that those ideas could be turned into programs that would improve the quality of life for the people who watched them. We had all been told by our management that we were a business and that, to be a successful business, we must serve every segment of the community—a mandate that resulted in one of the longest-running programs in television history: *The Magic Toy Shop*.

General Manager Paul Adanti and Program Director Gordon Alderman thought that as part of our fifth birthday celebration we should develop a program for preschool children. Paul Adanti had only one request: he wanted a trolley car as part of the cast. Gordon Alderman, a graduate of Syracuse University's Drama Department and a man for whom television was more mission than medium, insisted it must broaden a child's world; it must help a child appreciate individual differences; and, "If it isn't fun," he said, "they won't watch."

We didn't have a big budget, but we had resources. Our first job was to convene a panel of experts: representatives from parent-teacher associations, mothers' clubs, the Syracuse public schools, the public library system, Syracuse University's nursery school, and the Oswego State Teachers College (now SUNY Oswego). There was no such term as "couch potato," but the panel was concerned that children would become passive viewers as they were spoon-fed information. Those of us who were from the station, however, believed that we could help children develop imagination. All of us wanted to stress what we called "the fourth R," respect. One member said, "We can sit around all day and say what children *should* watch. But they'll decide what they *will* watch."

We finally agreed that I would develop a pilot. I had to come up with an idea, invent characters, then cast the show. I consulted with our staff musician, Tony Riposo, and talked with experts about what kinds of stories we should include.

The advisory panel thought that my undergraduate degree in education and my graduate degree in communications qualified me for the job. I didn't tell them that I had spent my childhood putting on shows in the garage and that this assignment was a dream come true. I would have the chance to share a small town childhood with youngsters I'd never met. I was convinced that, although times change, children don't. The stories I had learned from parents, grandparents, and assorted aunts, uncles, and cousins would appeal to a new generation. (Time proved that theory to be correct.) I had always enjoyed pretending, so it seemed natural to create a make-believe world that came to be known as the Magic Toy Shop.

We decided to air the pilot before sign-on, which was then 9 a.m.



Magic Toy Shop cast members, from left to right: Eddie Flum Num (Socrates Sampson), Play Lady (Jean Daugherty), Merrily (Marylin Hubbard Herr).

Committee members agreed to select test families so that we would have a broad-based audience. Professor Lawrence Myers Jr. of Syracuse University's School of Journalism, whose expertise was in research, devised a two-part questionnaire: one part to track a child's reactions, the other to record a parent's reactions. (Remember, this was the 1950s, the age of stay-at-home moms.) We had an enthusiastic response. Parents and children didn't always agree, but both sides gave a thumbs up to the program we'd named *The Magic Toy Shop*.

We polished for more than a year before the program made its official debut on 28 February 1955. There was one major change from the pilot. The original proprietor of the shop was a character named Mr. Fudge. Because the children in the test families had confused him with Santa Claus, he was replaced by Merrily, who didn't look a bit like St. Nick.

I continue to get questions about where the ideas came from. Some ideas and, most importantly, the philosophy came from my hometown, Barnesboro, Pennsylvania, a small mining community, where we learned at an early age how much we needed each other; and from my parents, who taught us that each person has a talent and an obligation to develop

it. We were taught to look for the good in others and to compliment them on it. Because of that philosophy, the world of *The Magic Toy Shop* was a kind and gentle one.

I've discovered that the adults who were "our children" now want "their children" to know that world. They can still quote the opening: "Boys and girls, this is the door to the wonderful Magic Toy Shop. But to open it you need a key." Thousands of Central New York youngsters put their thumbs at the corners of their mouths and turned them up into a smile. There was a reason for that opening. We were asking for a commitment; we wanted them to earn their way into the shop.

It was called magic because the toys came to life at night. They reported to Floogie, the general of all the toys. He was part of the show from the beginning, along with Tommy Pup Dog, a floppy dog, who was always tired because he taught dancing at night. Later came Marmaduke, a dog; Cuddle Bunny, a rabbit; and Smokey the Bear. The toys who lived at the homes of the boys and girls in the audience also reported to Floogie.

He in turn shared the news with Merrily—one of four human cast members—who was in charge of all the activities. Her real name was Marilyn Hubbard Herr; she had studied at the American Academy in New York and earned a degree from Syracuse University in drama.

Merrily's chief assistant was Eddie Flum Num, who wore a sailor suit of sorts because he'd once served on a showboat. He was a gifted artist whose special job was drawing stories told by Mr. Trolley. (Paul Adanti got his wish and the character developed just the way he'd pictured it.) Eddie (Socrates Sampson in real life) also designed and built all the sets. He was a graduate of Syracuse University's School of Fine Arts.

Mr. Trolley was "the greatest story teller in the whole world and outer space." He was a link with the outside world and an authority figure—kindly, but strict. His real name was Lewis B. O'Donnell, and he had a bachelor's, a master's, and a doctorate from Syracuse University.

The fourth member of the cast was Twinkle, a clown and a cousin to all clowns, who talked only in music. Tony Riposo, who created the role, requested he be silent vocally, so children would learn to listen to his music. A graduate of Syracuse University's School of Music, Tony was, and is, one of the most respected musicians in Syracuse.

The amazing thing to me is that these four were all working at the station. We did not go outside to audition. We were all there at 101 Court Street. Marilyn insists it was providence.

At first Tony wondered how fellow musicians would feel about his be-



Mr. Trolley (Lew O'Donnell).

ing part of a “kids’ show.” He didn’t have to wait long for an answer. Because we were live, we had to have vacation replacements; so when Twinkle was away, children said the magic words “hocus pocus, dominocus, abracadabra and there you are,” and the piano played by itself, thanks to another musician, who was out of sight at a keyboard in the corner of the studio. Some of the area’s finest performers belong to the exclusive “Magic Piano Club,” including Mario DeSantis, Sox Tiffault, Joe Carfagno, and Phil Klein. Tony found out that they appreciated the importance of his role.

Mr. Trolley had several vacation replacements: Mrs. Trolley; a cousin, Texas Trolley; and even a British relative, Cecil Tram. We had back-up plans for Eddie Flum Num too. His parents had seven sons, all named Eddie (and George Foreman thought he had something new). Each son had a different middle name: Eddie Tum Num liked to eat, Eddie Sum Num was good at math, Eddie Drum Num was a percussionist, Eddie Hum



Twinkle the Clown (Tony Riposo).

Num was a singer, Eddie Mum Num could keep a secret, and Eddie Crum Num (the only one who actually made an appearance) liked peanut butter crackers and always had a pocket full of crumbs. “Flum” is a word that means very good in the Num family circle. Eddie Flum Num was a very good artist and we used the word “flum” to describe anything extra special.

We hadn’t yet planned a vacation replacement for Merrily, when she broke the news that she was pregnant. We had to decide what to do. She wanted to work as long as she could, and we wanted that too. (Remem-

ber, this was the mid-1950s when pregnancy was something you didn't discuss on the air, and the term "maternity leave" was not part of our vocabulary.) The first thing we did was put everyone in smocks. Certainly for Eddie Flum Num the artist and Twinkle the clown the costumes made sense. Merrily wore her smock some days and regular clothes on others. Eddie and Twinkle liked their smocks so much that they held on to them till the final closing of the door.

The next step was to reconvene the advisory panel. They worried that, when Merrily/Marylin took time off, the children would resent her leaving or refuse to accept the person who came to take her place. Their solution—as Merrily was seen by many children as a mother figure—was to cast someone in the role of grandmother. "Children need both," claimed the experts.

They envisioned the new cast member doing what grandparents traditionally do: share stories, bring new toys, praise them, love them, and even spoil them a bit. I thought we'd have to search for a person who could blend into a cast that had become family. The decision was taken out of my hands. "You will do it," said Gordon Alderman. "You will be the Play Lady from Toyland. Nobody knows the program as well as you do."

The change was not easy. It meant I could no longer direct the program, although I would continue to write and produce it. I'd have to turn "my child" over to someone else. (I must add here that from the beginning the crew had been completely supportive. At many stations "kids' shows" receive low priority, but at WHEN no project was more important. So I knew the show would be in good hands.) I moved to a place I never thought I'd be: in front of the camera.

To this day I refer to the Play Lady in the third person: "She did this, she did that." But one day at the New York State Fair I learned that children didn't make the distinction between Jean Daugherty and the Play Lady. I was walking along and felt something around my knees. I looked down and found myself in the grasp of a child. "Play Lady," she said, "how did you get here?" I answered, "They ran a special train from Toyland." She said, "Isn't it lucky I picked today to come?" I suddenly realized that this child believed everything I told her. That was an awesome responsibility. We all took that responsibility seriously.

The Play Lady started her visits to the show sometimes one day a week and sometimes two or three. As "due date" approached, she visited every day. Merrily opened the Magic Door right up to the day before the baby was born. On 1 March 1956, when the Toy Shop celebrated its first birth-

day, Corliss Alexandra Herr was born. She weighed eight pounds—the perfect number for Channel 8!

Merrily returned to the show in six weeks, but the Play Lady continued to visit by way of a wonderful invention called the Abracadabra Book that enabled children to explore the world. She escorted them to far-away places like the United Nations, Washington, D.C., and far below the earth into a coal mine. Places that might have been frightening, like the doctor's office or the barbershop, were in this way made familiar. The cast left the confines of the studio too. At holiday time we made eight to ten personal appearances each weekend. Always we strove to let the children know how important they were. *The Magic Toy Shop* was invited to be part of Onondaga County's first Festival of Nations celebration in 1968. We greeted thousands of youngsters at the State Fair, and never, never, did we step out of character.

For me *The Magic Toy Shop* was the icing on the cake. My primary job was producing public affairs programming. We attempted to deal with the problems facing our community by spotlighting people who were coping creatively. We celebrated the human spirit by proving that one person who takes action can make a difference. In offering such programs we hoped that we too were making a difference. I don't pretend to be the best writer or producer, but I have to be classed as one of the most prolific because my name appeared on more than 16,000 shows—except for the 6,200 *Magic Toy Shop* episodes. I suppose I wanted children to think that “it just happened.”

Those who analyzed the program realized that it was carefully put together. The child was to be a participant, not just a viewer. There was a quiet time, then an active time. Our audience included babies in playpens as well as kindergartners. We tried to find something for everyone. Parents told us that babies reacted first to Twinkle's music. The stories, which ran three to four minutes, required the greatest attention span. Developing that attention span was an important goal. Kindergarten teachers thanked us.

Each day Merrily taught a song; experts at Oswego had suggested the method. She sang the song, then she said each line. Children repeated it with Eddie Flum Num. Then they said it together, then sang it together. It's interesting to note that college students at Oswego watched the programs so that they could use the same technique when they entered an elementary school classroom.

We actively shared records and music games. Children were invited to wave their arms like windmills or like the trunks of elephants. They

climbed pretend ladders and marched and danced, and in so doing exercised large muscles. Physical education teachers told us that was important. Many of them believed that exercise could aid reading readiness.

Most of the stories I wrote for *The Magic Toy Shop* conveyed not-too-subtle messages. There was “Wait-a-While O’Hara,” who said it once too often. As a result he missed out on a trip to the fair because his grandfather (as warned) wouldn’t wait. But a compromise was reached. Afterwards the young man occasionally said, “Wait just a minute. I’m almost finished,” but most of the time he was ready before everyone else. The “Birthday Boy” who wouldn’t show his gifts discovered that it’s not much fun to teeter-totter without a partner.

The stories I enjoyed most dealt with characters who didn’t always fit the norm, but who managed by working hard to find a special niche. “Jennifer Witch” was a failure because her witches’ brew tasted like onion soup (it was delicious, very unwitchlike). But one Halloween she carved the first jack-o’-lantern to comfort a lonely scarecrow. Her invention became an instant hit. Her sister witches applauded her. They even used her recipe to make onion soup.

“Benjy Polar Bear” was allergic to cold. He traveled to the warmth of Hollywood and became a star, but he was homesick. So he designed a thermal cowboy suit and starred in the “Wild North Show.”

There are dozens of such stories about what I call “my people.” The world didn’t adjust to them, but they found a way to adjust to the world without giving up their individualism, and in doing so promoted an appreciation of diversity.

In almost three decades the world outside *The Magic Toy Shop* changed. There were changes in the station too. Channel 8 became Channel 5. In 1962 we moved from 101 Court Street to new headquarters on James Street and continued until 1982.² WHEN became WTVH when the Meredith Corporation sold its local radio station and the call letters. In December 1993—forty-five years after they had embraced television—Meredith sold WTVH to the Granite Corporation. It’s obvious that the president and general manager, Maria Moore, appreciates the past. That’s her reason for approving the new theme: “Then, Now and Always.”

Those words are particularly important to the Toy Shop family—those who appeared on the show, those who worked on it, and, most impor-

2. On that James Street site, where *The Magic Toy Shop* ran its course, the home of Edward Noyes Westcott once stood. There he finished writing *David Harum: A Story of American Life* before succumbing to tuberculosis in 1889. See Brian Ladewig’s article, p. 107. *Ed.*

tantly, those who watched. For twenty-seven and a half years and 6,200 episodes our goals never changed. We were interested in children and the adults they would become. We wanted them to carry their childhood with them. In that I believe we were successful. Why do I think so? Because young adults whose names I don't know and whose faces I've never seen approach me in a restaurant, at a football game, or on the street and put their thumbs at the corners of their mouths and turn them up into a smile. What was the true magic of the Toy Shop? It was the talent, the skill, and most of all the love that Marilyn Hubbard Herr, Socrates Sampson, Lew O'Donnell, Tony Riposo, and those marvelous Magic Piano players put into their performances.

Our grown-up Toy Shop "alumni" often tell us, "We'd like our children to share our childhood; they've never seen *The Magic Toy Shop*." There are plans to remedy that. We're working with the Onondaga Historical Association on establishing a permanent exhibition. The sets and costumes are there; and Floogie, Tommy Pup Dog, and all the original toys are ready to take their bows in downtown Syracuse.³

We tried to create for young viewers a kinder, gentler world, and we're grateful that now, as adults, they recognize that. It's trite, but oh so true, that *The Magic Toy Shop* was a labor of love. When we play the tape of the last show—when the door closed forever—we listen to the final words that Merrily said to the children: "We will be forever friends." And so we are.

3. WTVH has begun a *Magic Toy Shop* web site, which can be found at www.wtvh.com/play-lady.html.