

No phoniness in 'Mr. Roger's Neighborhood'

By PAUL HENDRICKSON
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Years ago, when he was fresh out of college and floor-managing the Gabby Hayes cowboy show at 30 Rock in New York City, Fred Rogers got a piece of advice to last a television lifetime. "Freddy," Gabby said one day, "when I'm on the air I see just one little buckaroo out there." And right there, perhaps, was given the key to the eventual kingdom of "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood."

Tapping a chair in his office: "Why don't you sit here right beside me and we'll be more comfortable." Eleven o'clock in the morning, Pittsburgh, WQED-TV, and, ah, this voice. Ah, but the pacific, immediately reassuring, just-this-side-of-adenoidal voice of Fred McFeely Rogers. Can it be real? And won't you be its neighbor? Could you, would you?

I've always wanted to have a neighbor just like YOU

Would you be mine?

Please, won't you be my neighbor?

It turns out it's not a phony voice.

Not at all. Fred Rogers talks this way in real life. Oh, a little speedier on the uptake, but right at you and chock-a-block with love and sincerity and the same built-in pauses. This is the voice that tells approximately 2 million video kiddies, "You've made this day a special day by just your being you. There's only one person in the whole world like you, and people can like you exactly as you are." In their own way these vocal cords are as famous as Mr. Sinatra's.

Kids are always the first to know if you're a phony, of course. You couldn't fool them this long, after so many years, after so many 5 o'clocks in the neighborhood of Henrietta Pussycat and Queen Sara Saturday and Daniel Striped Tiger. Is it really any wonder this rare and soothing voice goes out nationwide (and to Canada and Pago Pago, too) to 250 PBS stations and 7 million households — including who-knows-how-many peeping parents?

The neighborhood's core viewing group is 3-to-5-year-olds, but the mail suggests there are any number of "overlaps." To some older kids, Mr. Rogers is a memory chord to lost childhood. He has been on, in one incarnation or another, for more than a quarter of a century. Once Gloria Swanson called up the neighborhood from her Park Avenue neighborhood. She's mad for the show, it turns out.

"I think some people wonder ... if you're real," the voice is saying. "Some people have actually said just that to me: 'Are you real, Mr. Rogers?' Which reminds me of a story I'd like to tell you. A child said to me once, 'How did you get out?' He meant, how did I get out of the box? So I did my best to explain about television, about how the people on TV are real and all, only you can't exactly touch them.

"So here I was trying to explain

about Mr. Rogers and the television neighborhood and how strange it probably was for him to see me outside of that. The child kept nodding and listening to me, and then when I was done, he said: 'But how are you going to get back in?'"

When Mr. Rogers was 8 years old, his grandmother bought him a piano. All his grief and rage came out at that piano. It was his first way of saying how he felt. "He could just laugh or weep through the tips of his fingers," says a friend who has known him for decades.

In his office is a giant oil of a kid gone fishing. "Oh, that boy is sooo many things in me," he says dreamily, the gaze drifting upward. "He has a fish, which not only symbolizes a Christian faith, but the love I felt for my grandparents. When I was growing up, one of my grandfathers regularly took me fishing, while the other always wanted to take me deep-sea fishing. But he didn't get to. He died when I was a child.

"I don't know ... my childhood must have been one in which people communicated to me that there is great value in little children. Why do some people think this work is so ... odd? There was great love in my childhood. I had a pretty modulated way of dealing with my anger: I always went to the piano. I think there must be a longing in anyone who has been created to want to create something — don't you? There must be something deep within us all that would like to respond to our initial creation."

His eyes are watering.

"Look: I'm not an actor. I'm not a performer. I wasn't someone prepared for any of this. It's just ... existential. It has to do with being here and with sharing yourself."

Fred Rogers is 54 years old. He grew up in Latrobe, Pa., one year ahead of another Latrobe immortal, Arnold Palmer. Mr. Rogers, in his grown-up life, has two sons, both in their twenties, both gone from home, though still in Pittsburgh. Mr. Rogers used to live in a house in a place called Squirrel Hill, which is very beautiful, but now he and his wife have moved to an apartment. The apartment is very beautiful, too. Their twin baby grand pianos came with them, of course. (Mrs. Rogers is a concert pianist.)

Mr. Rogers has many honorary degrees from important universities. Do you know what he's doing with all those hoods? Making a quilt. He needs six more degrees and then the quilt will be done. (Later, Mr. Rogers wonders if this should be stricken from the record; he doesn't want to offend.)

A long time ago — the same year he graduated with a music degree from Rollins College in far-off Winter Park, Fla. — Mr. Rogers landed a job at NBC-TV in far-off New York City. He carried coffee and Coca-Cola for the stars. Pretty soon he got to be floor director of "Your Lucky



Mr. Rogers and the 'Neighborhood' Trolley

Strike Hit Parade" and "The Kate Smith Hour."

Even now, Mr. Rogers cannot exactly say what pulled him back to Pittsburgh and to educational TV in 1953 to take up his life's work. "I really believe it was the power of the Holy Spirit," he says. "I mean, what did my parents think about all this? Here I was, leaving New York and network television to come back to Pittsburgh to start working with puppets. It was all so vague. Why, in the beginning, we used to go into the studio and just sort of ... play." Mr. Rogers writes all the scripts and all the tunes for the neighborhood.

Rogers is an ordained minister in the United Presbyterian Church. For eight years on his noon hour, he went to the seminary. He was ordained in 1963. He can't really say why he went, but anyway, his message turned out to be the medium.

Betty Aberlin, who plays Lady Aberlin on "Mr. Rogers," is a New York actress currently on national tour in "I'm Getting My Act Together and Taking It on the Road." "I came to this show 14 years ago as

another stoned New Yorker," she says. "I loved children the way childless people do. I was expressing it before, but I wasn't really a part of it. And then, too, I was always fending off criticism about being in the show, and about Fred. Friends would say, 'The guy's gay, right?' Or 'Tell me, what's he really like?' What he's really like is right in front of your nose.

"I feel I'm part of Fred's vocation now. I'm a character in his work." Probably because he is so sincere, even naked in his feelings, Rogers has become the ripest mock in all TV.

The staff loves the "SCTV" parody, where Mr. Rogers, done up like a 90-pound weakling in a boxing ring with a busty Julia Child. It's the Battle of the PBS Stars. Mr. Rogers comes out for the bout in pasty legs and black, wriggly socks.

Rogers himself says, "I don't really mind the parodies of me as long as they're not hostile. I think some comedy can be downright hostile. And some of it can be dangerous. There was this radio disc jockey we heard about who was saying things

like 'Now boys and girls, just go get your mother's hair spray and your father's cigarette lighter and I'll show you how to make a blow torch.'"

Sometimes it seems as though half the drive-time radio jocks and stand-up comics in America do Mr. Rogers imitations. Rogers himself has done guest shots on the shows of Charlie Rose, David Letterman, Richard Simmons. (That one was rare, people say.) And then there's Johnny Carson.

Carson has done several Mr. Rogers skits, one called "Mr. Codger's Neighborhood." Though hilarious, the message seems to be that Rogers is a simpleton and maybe a faker to boot. A while ago, David Newell, the PR director of "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood" (he also plays Mr. McFeely), called up Fred DeCordova, producer of the Carson show, and said: Hey, how about some equal time?

So Rogers got invited on the show. He came on late in the program in his tennies. He was visibly nervous. This hip, talk-show palaver was not exactly his thing. Almost before he got into the chair, the audience was

snickering. And that's when a funny thing happened: Carson turned protective. He seemed ashamed of his audience's bad manners. (Never mind that he couldn't resist getting in a few good jokes at Rogers' expense.

"Can't you spot moments in your life when you just know?"

Mr. Rogers is telling a story. As usual, there are the pregnant pauses, the time for wondering aloud, for star-gazing at mystery. "We were in Florida vacationing, and the boys were quite small, and Joanne put a lot of suntan lotion on Jamie, who was 2, I think. She went out about waist deep and dipped him in the water. I was standing right near her, and I thought, well, I'll just grab him.

"But he was gone. I looked and looked. 'Joanne!' I screamed. I screamed to the sky, and in a couple of seconds I saw this foot and I grabbed for it. But it was coated with lotion and it slipped away again. An eternity passed.

"Finally, I had him. Well, we just sat on the beach and wept. "And after that I knew."

Half her life in same TV series

Melissa Gilbert — growing up 'On The Prairie'



Melissa Gilbert

By VERNON SCOTT
UPI Hollywood Reporter

HOLLYWOOD (UPI) — Melissa Gilbert, the buck-toothed, freckle-faced moppet we all watched grow up in "Little House On The Prairie," has blossomed into an 18-year-old leading lady.

This year she replaces Michael Landon as the star of the hour-long drama series, which has been re-titled "Little House: A New Beginning."

The jolt of carrying the show on her own fragile shoulders has accelerated Melissa's maturation. The episodes are centered on her character, Laura Ingalls Wilder, now married and the mother of two.

As a 9-year-old, Melissa captured viewers' hearts with her piping voice, toothy smile and natural talent. The crew members also were captivated.

The gaffers, electricians and other stagehands still call her Half-Pint with affection, which she returns with interest.

But circumstances are different now. Melissa finds herself working harder than before. The state no longer limits her to an eight-hour work day. Gone are the California social worker and teacher.

"I work 10 to 12 hours a day," Melissa said, rolling her expressive green eyes. "I'm really bushed at the end of the day. I have to get up at 4:30 in the morning to get to the location ranch on time.

"I can't believe those teeth, the big ears, freckles and squeaky voice. I remember what I was up to in every scene and I recall what was going on in my personal life at the time and how I felt. That little girl had a lot of personality. And I'm still her."

— Melissa Gilbert

"Now that the burden is on me, I have more scenes and more heavy dialogue. But I'm not complaining. I love every minute of it.

"Sometimes I get moody and depressed. Victor French, who plays Mr. Edwards, is a close friend. One day when I was feeling yucky he took me aside and asked what the matter was.

"I said, 'How do you know I'm not in a good mood?' And he said, 'I've known you for nine years and I can tell when you're feeling down.'"

"That's the good part of this show. Most of the cast have been with me since the beginning and so have about 20 members of the crew. We all love one another.

"Sometimes I get antsy with the same day in and day out routines of the series. But then I think of the cast and crew and I can't consider the thought of leaving."

Earlier this season Melissa was

goofing off and Edwards approached her again, saying, "Now that Michael's gone, you're the symbolic father of the show. You've got to develop an authoritative attitude."

Acting, which was second nature to Melissa as a child, now requires more effort and thought.

"I have to concentrate more than when I was a kid," Melissa said. "All children are natural actors, but as you grow up you learn to conceal your thoughts and feelings."

"As a grown-up actress I force myself to open up hidden thoughts and lose my inhibitions, which kids never have to worry about."

Unlike Kristy McNichol, Jody Foster and many another young actress anxious to flee the nest, Melissa is content to live at home with her mother, brother Jonathan, 15, who also is a cast member of "Little House," and sister Sara, 7.

Missella's growing financial for-

tunes have been wisely invested. She is careful with a dollar, sparing in her wardrobe, and she drives a medium priced automobile.

She dates only on weekends and has been seen with such popular young actors as Tim Hutton, Rob Lowe and Christopher Atkins.

"I'm criticized for dating actors," Melissa said, smiling, "but they are the only people I meet. Besides, I find actors attractive and we have things in common. I date different people and I'm not serious about any of them.

"Right now I have no plans for getting a place of my own. I rely on my mother too much. Coming home at night to a family gives me a lot of security."

Missella enjoys watching syndicated re-runs of "Little House," laughing at the feisty little mite she was a few years ago.

"I can't believe those teeth, the big ears, freckles and squeaky voice," she said. "I remember what I was up to in every scene and I recall what was going on in my personal life at the time and how I felt.

"That little girl had a lot of personality. And I'm still her. Not enough time has gone by that I think of her as a stranger. I'm still real spunky and sparky. No one on the set ever had to say, 'Put more life into it, Half-Pint.' And as for as I'm concerned, they never will."