

Sesame Street's Kermit makes debut in Khmer

By Jon Bugge

Cambodian children could soon be learning the facts of life from childhood characters familiar to much of the world: Kermit the Frog and Oscar the Grouch.

Cambodia's first episode of Sesame Street was approved by the series' producers in the US for development this October. The project began over a year ago with support from a US-based organization, Educational Television for Cambodia. The actual production was done in a Phnom Penh Studio by John Pates, a video producer from Singapore, and his crew at Babel Studios.

"The idea was to do something that the children of Cambodia can relate to rather than abstract foreign interpretations," said Pates.

He oversaw the first production of Khmer language Sesame Street, completed in September. This episode will be the first of its kind to incorporate foreign footage since the American series usually insists on a US locale.

In the Cambodian episode, a technicolor crew of puppets teach the English alphabet as a game and show kids that learning can be fun. With their trademark mop heads and high-pitched voices, the characters bounce from skit to skit. Spliced with classic 1960s animation, the psychedelic episodes saturate the screen with color.

To test children's reaction to the show, the creators aired an episode at the Children and Poor Community Development Organization orphanage in October. According to staff, the children reacted enthusiastically.

The series has already proven a success around the world. Sesame Street, which first aired in 1969, has appeared in more than 120 countries. The characters sprang from the creative genius of Jim Henson, founder of The Muppets, a television show in the 1960s.

Sesame Street's mission is to help pre-schoolers make the transition from home to school by teaching them mathematics, reading and social skills.

Cambodia's chapter of Sesame Street seeks to make the show relevant to Cambodian children. But it was not easy to present the American show in a Cambodian context.

"You have to be ready to compromise," said Sopheap Pich, a Cambodian returnee from Massachusetts and one of the show's translators.

Drawing on the skills of Royal musicians and local and international experts, the production mixes Khmer footage with traditional Sesame Street characters. The scenes include everyday life in Cambodia, such as swimming and eating Khmer food, as well as the antics of the puppets.

The music also posed a challenge. Music was vital to the production since a cornerstone of Sesame Street ideology is that children learn quicker through songs and games. Translating lyrics into Khmer, while preserving Western melodies, involved compromise.

Certain Khmer instruments had to be modified to play notes required in Western music.

Since Khmer music uses a pentatonic or five-note scale, frets had to be added on stringed Khmer instruments to match the Western scale that descends or ascends in semitones.

Also, the use of harmonies, or progressions of chords, is not indigenous to Khmer music. Since it plays such an important role in Western music, this too had to be taught.

The wacky Sesame Street voices also required some coaxing from the actors and children. They were unclear about how they should sound. Initially, some of the actors spoke too seriously. As they relaxed and began to joke around, they were able to make the high-pitched squeaks and silly voices for the show.

For fans of the series, the pilot episode-brought to you in association with the letter L as sung in Billy Idol's rock anthem Rebel Yell-would leave even the most jaded grinning.

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