

**TELEVISION SCREEN DANCE FOR YOUNG AUDIENCES: THE PRAXIS OF
EFFECTIVE CREATION TO ENGAGE YOUNG AUDIENCES THROUGH DIGITAL
MEDIA**

CHRISTINE BRKICH

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Abstract

In today's growing digital media trends, more young audiences are accessing their choice of entertainment through a variety of online streaming. In a vastly growing competitive market, it is important to stay current when developing entertainment that is both fun for children, and educational to entice the approval of parents. This thesis looks to utilize the technical conventions posed by Dr. Shalom Fisch in creating children's television, so as to encourage engagement. The technical conventions explored include multiple sources of appeal within the work, the use of clarity and age-appropriate content, and the use of formal features when editing the work. These conventions will be compared and explained when applied to the creation of the children's production *The Legwarmers in: Finding Family Roots*. The success and the challenges of establishing these conventions while creating the work will be discussed as well as the success of the final presentation outcome, leading to its future prospects.

Dedication

Earlier this year I was assigned the task of completing an Artist Statement. This statement is to reflect upon who I am as an artist, the work I create, and the purpose of my work in this world. It was not to be a reflection of my past or who I was, growing up as a child. And yet in delving deeper into who I am as an artist, I realized that I could not be who I am if it were not for my parents who raised me, and my grandparents who nurtured me. And so, this dedication is for my family. To my grandfather, whose knee I would sit upon to listen to his captivating storytelling and who gave me the gift of telling stories. To my grandmother, who had the ability to infuse warmth into our home, cooking every meal with grace and love, and who taught me the value of togetherness and tradition at our table. To my mother, whom I can still hear whispering to me in my quietest moments about her faith and belief in me, urging me to move forward towards the next success with a single step. And to my father, who is the reason that these words unfold in these following pages, and who is the motivation behind this creative journey that has held its own cornerstone in my life. To a man whose undying belief and faith in something larger than me, more than I could ever have thought imaginable, has kept me alive with an ongoing urgency to tell my story—to tell this story; A story of tradition... A story of family... A story of love. Thank you, to you all, for every pillar you have laid down for me from which to build my own artistic foundation, while weaving your unconditional love and support into the tapestry of my life.

*~ The key component of family was love; if there was no love, there was no family ~
(Truglio, on building a family on Sesame Street)*

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INTRODUCTION

The Child's Digital Lens

When pioneer television producer Joan Ganz Cooney decided to work alongside child psychologists to develop an educational television show for children in 1967, known as *Sesame Street*, the collaboration seemed far too iconoclastic at the time. It was questionable why anyone would want to develop research around a children's program. Cooney states: "the notion of combining research with television production was positively heretical in 1967 when we began making plans for the Children's Television Workshop" (Quoted in Fisch and Truglio xi).

I have written, directed and choreographed an episode of *The Legwarmers*, a children's production based on a series that I created collaboratively with my sister, Lisa Brkich, in 2006. This episode, entitled *The Legwarmers in: Finding Family Roots*, is geared towards an audience target market range between the ages of four and seven. In developing this pilot project, my interest in working with technical television conventions stems from the endeavor to help increase young audience engagement and educational efficacy in dance. I endeavour to explore and utilize the research of children's current viewing trends with the rise of new media to help stabilize the purpose and need for *The Legwarmers* children's production, in the current online streaming market place. In approaching *The Legwarmers* production through film, I felt my approach needed to focus on holding the attention of the young viewer by integrating choreographic humour and a fast-paced approach, both in dance sequences and movement dialogues, while maintaining educational undertones. However, as this notion is merely a starting

point, my curiosity plays a role in discovering what other filming techniques and conventions I am able to explore in order to inspire engagement.

Fred Rogers (producer and creator of *Mister Rogers Neighbourhood*) observed the medium of television for the first time inside the home of his parents' house and thought: "what a wonderful medium to reach a mass audience[,]” while simultaneously wondering “why is it being used to showcase people throwing pies in someone else’s face?” (Rogers in “Won’t You Be My Neighbour?”).

Now, as *Sesame Street* celebrates over fifty seasons and four thousand and five hundred episodes since its inception, children’s programming has reached exponential heights, filtering through a wide variety of broadcast networks, personal video recording devices, as well as “on demand” and streaming services such as Netflix. Children of all ages are now capable of viewing a limitless variety of programs suitable for multiple electronic and mobile devices which can instantly gratify their viewing pleasure at any time, day or night. With a multitudinous array of programming available at the touch or a swipe of a button, television creators and respective artists creating in the medium of children’s television are continually being challenged to develop engaging programming in today’s ever-stimulating and competitive online, streaming environment. Thus, in unfolding the statistics of children’s online programming, I am prompted to ask: is there a formula for creating children’s work on screen effectively?

CHAPTER ONE

The Legwarmers: A Brief History

The Legwarmers' history begins with a corps group of dance artists. Founded by my sister Lisa Brkich and myself in 1996, this collective of dancers and choreographers created and performed under the title of InMotion Dance Company. For many years the company explored a contemporary choreographic genre of mostly full-length dramatic works, while dabbling in comedic choreographies and utilizing a narrative preference of storytelling—in attempt to evoke varying emotional responses from the audience. In the year 2000 the seed for *The Legwarmers* was planted; inspiration grew out of a popular, short narrative work entitled *The Maestro's First in [[: A :]]*. This piece involved a contemporary comedic choreography to portray a flustered clown conductor who eventuated the task of conducting and organizing four unruly and unfocused clowns. Among our viewing audience were young children, attending a performance with their families, who particularly enjoyed the journey of the clowns.

This new-found audience of youth led us to consider creating specific work more attuned to pleasing a young audience—unlike the contemporary dramatic pieces we were then choreographing. Delving deeper into this stream of artistry, Lisa and I decided to develop an original children's work, conceptualizing the world, its inhabitants and larger purpose, as a theatre production. Thus in 2006 *The Town of Spool*, where a people called Kanoopies dance their everyday adventures, came into fruition; a narrative that is told through the lens of an endearing Kanoopie family known as the Legwarmers.

Understanding the Viewing Trends of Today's Child

Though it began as a live theatre production, we realized that obtaining a young audience through the medium of a live stage format would take time and effort in seeking venues for viewing. Moving the production from live theatre to a television concept proved somewhat harrowing, yet necessary, in order to compete for children's viewership in today's online and fast-streaming world. Though television streaming did not exist at that time, the impact of VHS (or Video Home System) and DVD (or Digital Versatile Disk) technology was vastly serving the need for instant viewing gratification. According to Victoria J. Rideout, Elizabeth A. Vandewater, and Ellen A. Wartella, the Kaiser Family Foundation—a non-profit organization that focuses on national health issues and policy (kff.org)—released a report in 2003 that suggested “on average, youngsters in this age group spend just under 40 minutes a day watching videos or DVDs (Rideout et al. 13).¹

However, since 2003 viewing trends have significantly been altered with regards to purchasing DVDs or VHS tapes. In a changing world of digital streaming, online entertainment is immediate and thus more competitive to engage viewers within the streaming market place. I realized that if I was to rebuild *The Legwarmers* production on screen, it would be vital to stay current with popular modes of visual consumption; to speak to audiences at their levels and forms of accessibility in order to develop viewership. Moreover, attention to current trends in children's viewing practices reveals shifting emphasis from VHS and DVD media towards online platforms. The effects of this trend are notable in funding changes (Robertson). According to Susan Krashinsky Robertson of *The Globe and Mail* Canadian financing from broadcasters is veering towards online productions. Robertson states:

As viewing habits shift—particularly among the youngest audiences—and competition from streaming services such as Netflix has increased, the television broadcasters that have traditionally funded Canadian content productions are spending less on funding kids' shows (Robertson).

Considering Robertson's discussion of production funding and growth of streaming services, the market shares of platforms such as Netflix are likely to soar. Indeed, Netflix subscribers are on the upsurge, "growing from less than 23 million in 2011 to over 130 million in 2018" according to Netflix's statistics and facts ("Netflix – Statistics and Facts"). Further, Netflix statistics reports "[a]n estimated 37 percent of the world's internet users, use Netflix" ("Netflix – Statistics and Facts"), and with respect to children's content specifically, Cynthia Littleton clarifies that "Netflix has 200 shows in the kids and family section that have been viewed by at least 2 million households" (Littleton 1). Bearing in mind that Netflix and similar services have become a preferred and accessible medium, an important objective for me, as the creator of *The Legwarmers in Finding Family Roots*, is to increase the appeal of the program, likening it to what the target audience is watching, yet, differentiating it enough in order to remain unique and offer what other programs do not.

What sets Netflix apart from other streaming services has largely been their creation of original content. For example Netflix is set to spend upwards of eight billion dollars on content in 2018, and will have in the neighborhood of seven hundred original TV shows on the service worldwide this year, according to CFO David Wells (Spangler). Although much of their kids and

family content has been acquired, I perceived a window of opportunity upon learning that there is an abundance of animated works, which has opened a gap for live-action. Indeed, Littleton asserts that “building up its live-action bench is a priority as the bulk of their shows are animated” (Littleton 1). Another platform that holds promise is YouTube. According to Mark Sweney from *Ofcom*, a regulator for communications services which include TV and radio broadcasting, “children and young adults are watching about one-third less broadcast TV on sets than in 2010” and are instead turning to online platforms for viewing (Sweney 1). Recognizing that YouTube is a vehicle with exponential followers, Sweney reveals that:

YouTube was originally intended as a platform on which users [could] post original content thought to be interesting, funny or worthy for other reasons, [and] the website has since grown to become a powerful money-making tool. With almost 1.5 billion users worldwide, the company can count on a lot of eyeballs for monetizing its advertising content. This figure is projected to grow to 1.86 billion global YouTube users in 2021 (“YouTube – Statistics and Facts”).

This is promising to me as a creator and for my production of the live-action children’s series *The Legwarmers*. It is very easy and cost-effective to start my own YouTube channel and begin to expose material to the online world for viewing. As well, it is an effective way to encourage audience with an open forum to see what they are responding to.

CHAPTER TWO

What Makes for Quality Children's Programming?

Sociology writer Malcolm Gladwell—who is also a Canadian journalist for *The New Yorker* since 1996 and best-selling author of *The Tipping Point: How Little Things Make A Big Difference*—discusses various pop culture phenomena and why certain trends “stick,” as he describes it. Speaking to the success of *Sesame Street* Gladwell explains “*Sesame Street* was built about a single, breakthrough insight: that if you can hold the attention of children then you can educate them” (Gladwell 50). Adding to this Gladwell elaborates on the show's format, something he describes as “a magazine show” which he specifies is “[a] typical show [that] consists of at least forty distinct segments, none more than about three minutes” (Gladwell 60). Thus, following Gladwell, I recognize that format played a significant role in *Sesame Street's* success; the program's legacy has largely depended on its format (56). Indeed, Gladwell advises: “if you paid careful attention to the structure and format of your material, you could dramatically enhance stickiness” (56). The rationale was that the researchers of the Children's Television Workshop believed “preschoolers did not have the attention span to handle anything other than very short, tightly focused segments” (Gladwell 60)

Similarly Gladwell draws support from the analysis of Psychologist Elizabeth Lorch, based at Amherst College, who worked on the *Sesame Street* project and recalls:

the idea was that kids would sit, stare at the screen, and zone out. But once we began to look carefully at what children were doing, we found out that short looks were actually

more common. Children didn't just sit and stare. They could divide their attention between a couple of different activities (Lorch quoted in Gladwell 52).

While these perspectives advanced the idea of short attention spans, other practitioners suggested contrasting views. Building from the research and knowledge that *Sesame Street* provided, Gladwell notes that Todd Kessler, a Nickelodeon producer who worked on *Sesame Street*, left the show dissatisfied and suggests a different view (56). Prioritizing the importance of visual communication over concerns about attention spans, Kessler states:

I always believed that kids didn't have short attention spans, that they could easily sit still for a half an hour. Because the audience is not all that verbal or even preverbal, it is important to tell the story visually. It's a visual medium and to make it sink in, to make it powerful, you've got to make use of that (Kessler quoted in Gladwell 56).

Incidentally, upon leaving *Sesame Street* Kessler moved on to co-create *Blue's Clues*, a simplistic mono-storyline children's television program (Gladwell 56). Suitably, this program was based on visual cues and exaggerated long pauses for which the young viewer could respond to a question posed by Steve—the show's one and only cast member. Differing from *Sesame Street*, there were no puppets; and instead, there were colourful, two-dimensional, animated drawings of characters, and no witty adult humour or cleverness—that *Sesame Street*'s writers utilized to appeal to adult audiences possibly watching with their children. Nevertheless, the lack of adult-appealing undertones did not negatively impact the success of *Blue's Clues*, and yet, as

Gladwell acknowledges, “[i]t is difficult, as an adult, to watch *Blue’s Clues* and not wonder how this show could ever represent an improvement over *Sesame Street* (57). Yet according to Gladwell *Blue’s Clues* surpassed *Sesame Street*’s success, because “[w]ithin months of its debut in 1996, *Blue’s Clues* was trouncing *Sesame Street* in the ratings” (Gladwell 57).

Along a similar line as Kessler’s view, in the article *What’s so ‘new’ about ‘new media?’*: *Comparing effective features of children’s educational software, television, and magazines*, Shalom Fisch² stresses that in order to meet the cognitive demands for processing and comprehending material, within an age bracket of four to seven years old, the creation of the work should focus on particular conventions (107). The conventions that Fisch considers central are: the “sources of appeal, the need for material to be clear, explicit, and age-appropriate; legibility of text and the use of ‘formal features’” (Fisch 107). This expertise and theorization of successful television strategies and conventions, utilized to ensure effective audience engagement and successful children’s programming, is of significance to my project because Fisch compiles the research into sub-categories in order to ensure effective young audience engagement; a target market of ages four to seven years old, which is a demographic that I too am targeting.

Taken together, these arguments offer important considerations for the creation of my new episode of *The Legwarmers: Finding Family Roots*, targeted for a new audience in 2019. As a pilot project, I could only embark upon what my budget would allow; however, it was my hope that through careful collaboration, the above needs would be met in the best way possible. To do this I decided to focus on the break-down of the key considerations that Fisch presents—while also keeping in mind the significance of structure and format as Gladwell and Lorch

suggest and role of visual communication that Kessler emphasizes. In the process of working with and through these suggestions, a learning curve emerged, as a new team of Legwarmer creators and crew came together and began gathering and negotiating our working knowledge from this experience. This crew includes: Emma Bramma Smith as the visual artist, Erik Geddis as composer, and Zlatko Cetinić and Jonah Blaser (of Images Made Real Inc.) as directors of photography, editors, and sound designers. Yet ultimately the balancing of creative ideas and approaches (ours and those suggested by the specialists outlined in this chapter) has enabled us to move onward, after this project, with an enlightened sense of what is necessary to pursue effective, entertaining and educational television for young audiences. The following three chapters will take a closer look at Fisch's suggestions and how I sought to apply them when creating *The Legwarmers* episode.

CHAPTER THREE

Exploration of Appeal through Praxis

Perhaps the most critical convention suggested by Fisch is what is described as the use of “appeal” (107)—meaning engagement, interest and allure. As Fisch explains, appeal is crucial in attracting children’s attention to the material and in sustaining attention throughout use (107). “If children do not find such activities appealing, they will simply choose not to engage in them, thus eliminating the potential for any educational benefit at all” (Fisch 107-8). Fisch further subdivides the use of appeal and elaborates that “the appeal of a successful media product is often the result of an idiosyncratic blend of elements that unite to become greater than the sum of their parts” (Fisch 108).

In short, Fisch presents an argument for the importance of invoking appeal, which can be achieved through attention to various elements that ultimately come together. Thus in approaching the paradigm Fisch offers, I have developed an appeal (or engagement) praxis—a set of practices to invoke appeal in my production. This appeal praxis involves the implementation of humour, use of visual action versus dialogue, identification through characterization, and the efficacy of music and sound. Which I, following Fisch (107), also refer to as conventions.

Section A: Invoking Appeal through Humour

The first convention utilized in my appeal praxis, is the use of humour. Humour can be quite challenging to infuse into a work when considering the broad spectrum of what one perceives as “funny.” Considering the fact that my target audience is between the ages of four

and seven, I was careful not to create the work with the notion of merely “acting silly,” and I also wanted to maintain a thorough storyline. However, the use of slapstick humour and other clowning principles came into practice in both the blocking of the scenes and in various choreographic choices of the work. I chose these strategies to infuse humour, rather than other methods such as using sophisticated wordplay or puns in the dialogue—I found that verbal humour like this speaks to a different age group than my target audience. Thus, instead, I opted for visual humour where appropriate.

For example, in the Dinner Dance sequence at Granmamina’s home, the Legwarmers are situated around Granma’s dining table ready to feast on her “yummies.” The Legwarmers pass various bowls and plates of food across the table to each other, in multiple and crossing directions. The dialogue adds to the dinner confusion and table talk. My goal was to allow the energy and pacing of this scene to accelerate in order to reach a climax with the punchline as Modernmina becomes frustrated at the constant interruption and exclaims: “JAZZERMINA! I’m TRYING to EAT!” This cue shifts the energy of the table, bringing it to a frozen halt, as the other characters stop their dialogue and sharply look down towards Modernmina. This shift draws focus to the tension, while Folklormina attempts to gorge on an entire chicken placed at the end of a fork.

Many visual and narrative elements are at work to create the energy and rising tension. The visual is accentuated not only by the sheer size of the chicken approaching Folklormina’s mouth, but also by the overly exaggerated size of the serving fork with which she is trying to feed herself. In order for this visual to work humorously it was vital that the energy of the dialogue, prior to the cue line, was boisterous and animated—deserving of the punchline of the

segment. The balance of the Legwarmers' argument and facial expression is partnered with a close-up shot of Folklormina's encroaching chicken which helps to drive the humour forward. It was difficult to select the shot with an appropriate angle to recognize the ratio proportions of the chicken to the size of her mouth. After some deliberating, we cut a few sections together to help assist in this visual.

The slapstick moments of the work occur at various times but is prevalent in the opening dialogue sequence that unfolds, in another scene, as Tappermina falls on the floor of the Town of Spool Trolley because her tap shoes are too slippery, at which point Modernmina tries to bring her to her feet. Like a rag doll, she is passed from Legwarmer to Legwarmer as they nonchalantly carry on a discussion until, eventually, they drop her to the floor, only realizing what they have done after hearing the thud of her body hit the ground. This cartoon-like humour is extended upon with the following close-up shot of Tappermina lifting her head off the ground as she rubs it, only to fall back down again out of exhaustion. The most difficult execution of humour here came in the delivery of timing, and energy behind the dancer's reaction to Tappermina falling. Quick film cuts were also made from reaction to reaction to help pace it quickly with the added sound effect. Similarly, in another scene where Tappermina informs everyone about the Step of the Day and explosive excitement ensues, Granmamina is tossed from her standing position, flailing, until she is seated and joins in for the Step of the Day from her chair. Granmamina's very quick transition from lying flat in the chair to joining in on the Step of the Day fun proves to be a funny, energetic moment. The humour is punctuated as she flops back into the chair and resumes her exhausted position when the song is finished.

Finally, to develop the humour, I drew upon some simple clowning principles which I infuse into the last piece of choreography, directed by the Maestro as he begins to organize his panel of clowns in front of him. As a physical acting coach, at Ohio and Michigan Universities, and professional clown Drew Richardson offers a variety of simple clowning techniques for the actor to embody on his blog: *Think Foolishly* (Richardson 1). Looking to this blog for examples of technique I decided to explore the following methods that he presents:

- i. finding trouble; finding problems before they find you, gives the element of surprise.
- ii. staying with the problem; challenge relieves boredom, stretches your abilities, adds some fun, and makes the original problem fade away in the process.
- iii. don't solve the problem; do you really have to solve a problem to reach a goal? How can you move forward with this handicap? (Richardson 1).

The implementation of these techniques helped to build the beginning sequence of *The Family Dance* when introducing the clowns. In the original choreography, *Maestro's First in [[A]]*, this beginning section did not exist; rather, the frustration of the Maestro began because the clowns were not executing his choreography as he had wanted. However, in my re-iteration of the work, the Maestro counts his clowns repeatedly for the audience as he points his fingers at each clown, only to find one missing, and thus raising the problem—the thinking here is that young viewers might count along while watching. The missing clown continues to sneak around, hiding from the Maestro. In “staying with the problem” as Richardson suggests, this may arouse a few giggles as the Maestro continues to “solve a problem” that never resolves itself (1). Finally,

the section concludes as the Maestro finds himself wandering in circles until all the clowns follow him and eventually bump into him, knocking him to the floor, and thereby echoing the slapstick humour from earlier in the episode.

The quirkiness of Granmamina augments the humour, with her facial expressions and actions while trying to appease the Maestro as he unsuccessfully tries to teach the clowns his masterpiece. The ongoing humour of the choreography escalates as his frustration grows, finally bringing him to an overly exaggerated demise; the death of the Maestro clown. Finally, as one of the clowns approaches the Maestro on the floor to check for a pulse, she imbues the technique offered by Richardson, that is, “do[ing] the opposite, and break[ing] the rules” in effect (1). Specifically, instead of picking up his wrist to feel for a pulse, she lifts his foot to her ear and sadly renders the Maestro dead with a shake of her head. With this moment, I took the chance that the young viewers understand that this is not where to find one’s pulse and I hoped that the over-reactive, dramatic response from all the clowns would be cause for humour as well. As Richardson suggests, “you calculate a possible overreaction, manufacture the emotion, get caught up in the moment, get what you need, and then let it go[,]” elaborating that, “[m]any people usually suppress reasonable but outlandish responses to an insane world” (1). In doing so, the Maestro quickly snaps back up to standing, lavishing in his successful prank, and having the last laugh knocking his unruly clowns to the ground which concludes the choreographed slapstick finale.

While editing, although we wanted to be creative with various angles, this ending was best viewed from the front to ensure all reactions from the clowns were seen from the camera. Moreover, I had deleted an entire mid-section of the work that had harkened back to the Four

Signets of *Swan Lake* as a parody. When viewing this deleted part of the work on film, I realized that not only did it make the choreography too lengthy, where I would run the risk of attention being lost, but also, it was a parody that was mostly geared towards adult humour and the younger viewer may not have been able to relate the work back to *Swan Lake*.

Section B: Use of Visual Action versus Dialogue

The next convention that Fisch poses, in order to invoke appeal for a televised program, is the careful use of visual action versus dialogue (Fisch 108). For Fisch, visual action refers to “fast-motion, slapstick, or simply prominent activity of movement on the screen” and Fisch asserts that this is important because “both preschool and school-age children prefer television programs that feature visual action over lengthy scenes with ‘talking heads’” (Fisch 108). I agree with the utilization of this convention, which is why I believe the choreography and movement phrases in narrative form throughout the work are vital to communicate action and storyline.

Beyond the “talking heads,” movement enforces a shift in the pacing of the work significantly, especially when dance is inserted; whether to infuse energy with an up-tempo dance, such as my utilization of it in The Trolley Dance, or to shift the pace from stasis to a moving tempo, as is the case in the scene when Granmammina sings her family tree jig. Indeed, the use of The Trolley Dance helps to inform the audience of setting and space, as they are transported, on the trolley, to Granmammina’s house. This activity moves the plot along, through dance, and introduces a secondary character who eventually plays great importance in the storyline.

During the prologue of my episode of *The Legwarmers* a sequence I call The Legwarmer Family Dance employs the use of non-verbal communication to its audience with a focus on dancing gloved feet. Moreover, without the use of words, the gloved feet take on lives and personalities of their own, and they communicate through movement and mime phrases to each other while forcing the “sleeping feet” to wake up and join in. While workshopping this sequence, I first embodied the choreography myself and was unsure if the movement was reading effectively. I had performed a segment for my daughter (who is five years old) to learn from her reactions. At first she was silent, and this silence was quickly followed by a few giggles which became big belly laughter. She said that it reminded her of arguments with her brother. At the conclusion of the sequence, she came to lie down with me on the floor and asked if I would teach her the movement phrase. That moment became artistic confirmation of the “stickiness” factor that Gladwell speaks of (56). If the choreography is enticing a small child to dance and learn a movement phrase, regardless of difficulty or skill sets, then the phrase proved itself successful to me.

In addition to the aforementioned slapstick usage, the Legwarmer Family Dance uses dramatic irony—where the audience is informed of a secret that the characters on stage are unaware of—as a form of non-verbal communication by way of breaking the fourth wall. As an extension of this prologue sequence, I decided to introduce the Maestro at the conclusion of the prologue, and have him look directly at the audience within the frame—thus breaking the fourth wall, and speaking directly to the audience. This moment utilizes further non-verbal communication; the Maestro displays disappointment with a shake of his head, suggesting his defeat by the silliness of the clowns. The Maestro becomes irked in the following introductory

sequence when not able to locate the final clown. Similarly, this final clown, too, breaks the fourth wall. While relating movement through the lens of the camera, she sneaks around the Maestro, coaxing the audience to keep her little secret as she hopes to play her own version of hide-and-seek with Maestro, encouraging the audience to play along.

Section C: Identification through Characterization

Another important facet in increasing the appeal of a children's program is the relatability of characters for young viewers. As Fisch describes, "in numerous studies, children have pointed to appealing characters as reasons for liking television programs[" (108). More specifically, Fisch notes studies that suggest "children like characters who are: smart and/or helpful, a bit older than themselves, and in many cases, similar to themselves in gender, ethnicity or other characteristics" (Fisch 108).

In another work, entitled *G is for Growing: Thirty Years of Research on Children and Sesame Street*, Shalom Fisch and Rosemarie Truglio also discuss the role of models and identification on *Sesame Street*. Importantly, Fisch and Truglio highlight the diversity among the characters and argue that this creates relatability and identification between viewers and the characters (238).³ Indeed, Fisch and Truglio suggest "children may attend more to—and learn more from—models who are 'like them'" (Fisch and Truglio 238). Following the success of *Sesame Street's* diverse casting, that Fisch and Truglio discuss, I understand the significance in presenting a range of characters to identify with, and the "positive role models" of these characters that can then reach a diverse audience (238).

Jonathan Cohen, associate professor in the Department of Communication at the University of Haifa in Israel, focuses his research on “narrative persuasion, identification with media characters, parasocial relationship and perceptions of media influence” (University of Haifa website). Focusing on the viewer Cohen speaks to the agency in spectatorship, highlighting the process of identification in the act of viewing as “a mechanism through which audience members experience reception and interpretation of the text from the inside, as if the events were happening to them” (Cohen 245). Moreover, Cohen recognizes the vital role of identification through media and media images “because of its contribution to the development of self-identity” (Cohen 246). Whether “try[ing] on” various character attributes (249), or shaping behaviour and inciting intimidation, Cohen argues that television characters are influential (254).⁴ When observing my daughter’s connection to fictitious characters on screen, I agree with Cohen’s proclamation of self-identify development (246), and thus, worked to create positive character personalities with likeable attributes.

To do this, it became important to attend to the factors that Fisch and Truglio raise in the audition process. Originally, I had cast the character of Folklormina as Folklormino; a male character who I envisioned was versed in Latin and Cuban Salsa. However, due to unfortunate events, the dancer was not able to commit to the rehearsal process of *The Legwarmers*, and so a female flamenco dancer was cast in his place. While I was particularly pleased to have the talents of a flamenco dancer in the role of Folklormina, it concerned me that this choice now lent itself to an all-female cast and thus perhaps negatively charging the idea to the young viewer idea that “boys do not dance.”

To address this gender misrepresentation, I altered the idea of the family dance and changed my initial plans—which would have had traditional dance leanings. However, when I considered *The Legwarmers* and the history, which the work itself embodies, I decided it was important to include *The Maestro's First in [[:A:]]* as part of its history and tradition—gesturing back to *The Legwarmers'* predecessor. It became clear to me that tradition did not have to be exemplified as a traditional dance style, as long as the dance itself carried a meaning of history and purpose within it. This artistic decision made way for the original choreography to make its reprise, and in doing so, showcase the over-animated character of the Maestro. Because the Maestro is played by a man I was able to exemplify a non-gender bias in dance, through the use of this secondary character.

As Fisch and Truglio note, the ethnic diversity of the casting was also imperative to account for, in order to reach a wide ethnic viewership (238). Thus, *The Legwarmers* cast includes people of diverse backgrounds—the cast members differ in terms of culture, gender, and age, for instance. The (visual) lesson that is intended through the casting is the idea that despite various differences and identifications, these individual characters represent a loving family unit.

Considering the discussions regarding character modeling it was also important that I weave positive role modelling into each character as well as a sense of realism, and quirkiness or an idiosyncratic moment tied to each character. This was to reflect the wholeness of the character, mirroring the wholeness of viewers. Not knowing which character a child might identify with, I wanted to ensure that each character was likeable, to invite imitation in a positive way and/or to foster empathy and relatability between viewer and fictitious character.

Attending to character modelling and relatability allowed for me to focus on the connection of personality traits and characteristics more intently. I took further inspiration from Brian Little, a specialist of children's psychology who offers five dimensional traits that are utilized for forging relatability and diverse identification in his Ted Talk in Vancouver, British Columbia (Little). Using the acronym OCEAN, Little's five dimensions include: openness, conscientiousness, extroversion, agreeable, and neurotic (Little).⁵ I approached the character development by layering Fisch and Truglio's and Cohen's considerations through specific personality traits that follow Little's OCEAN characteristics. Across the OCEAN spectrum we created a cast of characters exemplifying the ups and downs of each personality trait in hopes to reach a vast array of viewers who can relate to the Legwarmer characters, in the hope of successfully connecting themselves to a likeness they are attracted to.

Modernmina Legwarmer's openness enables her to be all encompassing, grounded, and level-minded character as she moves through her day-to-day episodic situations. She is in love with Modern dance and is seen walking barefoot, feeling the earth against her feet and living under the influences of the late Isadina Duncamina—a play on the name of contemporary Modern dancer Isadora Duncan. She is the voice of reason among the Legwarmers, yet can also be easily distracted—with the chance meeting of a butterfly or the smell of Granmamina's apple dumpling pie. In this episode, it is Modernmina who offers the resolution that solves the family tree mystery by venturing to Granmamina's house for the answers. This shows her ability to stay grounded and how this personality trait provides the Legwarmers with the clarity they need.

The conscientious Tappermina is driven by time, exactness, and punctuality. She is always aware of responsibilities and the daily agenda of Step of the Day, ensuring everyone

keeps on schedule and moving to her own metronome. Tappermina loves to dance Tap and lives for the notion of one day having the ability to duet with the likes of “Freddermino Tappermino,” her hero. As the clock chimes, her slightly obsessive-compulsive nature is thrown off with the thought of Master Allegro awaiting their arrival at the Legwarmer dance studio for rehearsal. In this moment, Tappermina’s conscientiousness works to bring focus to the story and the task at hand. It is the wavering unsteadiness of the other Legwarmers that keep her in balance, reminding her of the importance of fun and that change is constant.

The extroversion of Jazzermina allows for a high energy performance and brings the episode to an elevated, up-tempo beat. She is the all-encompassing jazz performer who can be seen with stars in her eyes at the very thought of dancing alongside Lizamina one day. She approaches each situation with vitality, allowing very little time to think it through and enjoying the idea of jumping into new waters with very little calculation of possible outcomes. Her family is there to keep her on track; to pull her from her highest cloud or straighten out flustered ideas that she often confuses—such as the Legwarmer Family Tree and the concept of relativity.

The agreeable type in Folklormina allows for a slightly more mature, worldly character that has seen and experienced a little more than her cousins. Travelling to far-off places in the outside world, she is versed in the knowledge of other cultures and dances, and thus is eager to learn what the idea of “tradition” means, and how the intricacies of the family tree relate the Legwarmers to one another. She is eager to jump into a jig, or to dance a fiery flamenco sequence, and she works to keep the momentum of the Legwarmer family on an even-keel with her agreeable nature.

Finally, rather than characterizing a neurotic Ballerina that may be associated with a stereo-typical ballerina personality, Ballermina Legwarmer infuses the family with the sense of calm. It is her love of ballet that instills affection for all things beautiful and ethereal. Just the same, she is also excitable. For example, the thought of Master Allegro complimenting her most supreme tendu incites passion, and thus she holds on to his every word and voice of guidance. In Ballermina we see a strong, stable character who is rarely out of step, and who demonstrates a need to execute choreography with technical excellence. Furthermore, Ballermina bears an understanding of the world around her with an assuredness that comes from having a strong emotionally functional foundation.

By developing positive character attributes among the Legwarmers, my intention was to create a positive sense of self that viewers will take away while also forging emotional investment and commitment to *The Legwarmers*.

Section D: Music and Sound Effect

Music in children's programming serves many purposes, and when placed strategically in the work, accompanied with sound effects, can be very effective in gaining attention and appeal from the audience. According to Fisch, "[music and sound effects] have been found to be particularly effective when they signal the arrival of a familiar character or program element, or when music is lively and has a fast tempo" (Fisch 108). Gerald Lesser, child psychologist and long-time researcher for *Sesame Street*, likewise proposes that music can evoke and bring meaning to light for the child viewer (103). Lesser states: "For children, music and sound effects

serve a remarkably wide range of functions, demonstrating the children’s abilities to find meaning in many different musical forms and styles” (Lesser 103).

From the inception of *The Legwarmers*, the musical score has been based on original compositions. Initially it was created by percussionist Romano Di Nillo—whose musical selections have remained in the work—as well as some new compositions that have developed in collaboration with composer/pianist Erik Geddis for this episode. I wanted the compositions to have an energetic undertone, particularly because the first choreography, known as The Grandma Song, begins playing on the feel of a musical production genre. Firstly, the melody and lyrics of this song had been dancing in my head for about four years previous. Now I have fine-tuned the lyrics, and collaborated with Erik to help solidify the melody. Over the summer, I recorded myself singing the song, and from this (acapella) recording Erik produced a formal musical composition. Rehearsals became somewhat challenging, with the music being created at the same time; I had an unfinished musical score to work with, and thus often needed to sing along with the track while I guided the dancers through the choreography. Eventually, the music was recorded with voices and instrumentation; however this was not complete until post-production. I was quite pleased overall with the tempo and tone of the piece, and could feel its efficacy as the dancers would leave the studio humming the melody or singing the lyrics. The score demonstrated the “stickiness,” Gladwell urges for (56), and I became hopeful that young audiences would gravitate to the song in the same way.

The Dinner Dance sequence at Granmamina’s house proved to be slightly more difficult to bring together, musically. Because the dancers are in a stationary, seated position their movement is limited. For this reason, I chose to loop a piece of the repetitive, percussive music

that was created by Romano Di Nillo as an undertone to the dialogue. This accompaniment proved useful in the beginning of the choreography as the dancers move simultaneously with props and through upper body sequences and shapes—inspired by choreographer Kurt Joos’ work: *The Green Table*. As the dancers break into dialogue, the repeated undertones of the musical score support their dialogue which helps move the narrative forward.

The challenge in the work arose when Erik tried to infuse the work with Spanish guitar sounds—intended to allow Folklormina to dance with her napkin at the table as though it were her flamenco cape. Choreographically, this moment moves the narrative in another direction as Folklormina becomes absorbed in the napkin, adding flamenco rhythms with her feet. It was difficult to marry the fluid, whimsical meter of the guitar music with her select rhythms, thus I included a rhythmic acapella section that comes from the Legwarmers’ feet underneath the dinner table—typical of children who cannot keep their feet still under the table at mealtimes. The change of rhythm provides a shift both musically and choreographically: while offering visuals of multiple dance genres and styles—represented by the different shoes seen under the table—the visual communication in this scene is textured with the accompaniment of different flamenco and tap riffs which are audible. The challenge during post-production was to synchronize the sounds to compliment the varying rhythms.

These various visible and audible rhythms help the viewer tune into a moment, while offering a shift or transition in the narrative. Lesser explains how children’s attention moves in and out of viewing sequences as their interests change throughout the work (Lesser 103). Music is an effective tool to inspire a new moment for viewers, and direct focus (Lesser 103).

In order to infuse the work with musical signals, suggestions and emotional undertones, Erik decided that he would watch the entire episode after editing and improvise the underscore of the work, scene by scene, in order to add to the narrative and soundscape of the work. Similarly, in *The Family Dance* composition Erik decided to compose a basic and repetitive melody line that he could then embellish, post-production, while viewing the work. This musical maneuvering accentuated the emotional and dramatic range of the Maestro character as he escalates through the choreography, melodramatically. This was the most efficient way to match the choreography and music, both of which were being created simultaneously. I was inspired by the composition *Peer Gynt* by Edvard Grieg to reflect the conversation being had by the musical dancing feet in the prologue of the family dance. In keeping true to the essence of *The Legwarmer* musical themes, I wanted Erik to use the *Peer Gynt* melody by Edvard Grieg as a foundation and improvise an original composition in *The Legwarmers*' musical style. However, time would not allow for this composition to be created, though it is an artistic goal set aside for future iterations.

Sound effects aided the humourous slapstick conventions in particular places. Whether it was to accompany Tappermina's final cartoon-like fall to the floor, Jazzermana's over-reactive response to her family tree while tossing Ballermana aside, or Granmamina being flown into a chair in preparation for Step of the Day, sound effects accompanied each moment to draw attention and accent humour. The challenge here was in ensuring that the performance was executed with equal emphasis in order to warrant the sound effect. In some cases, I was trying to draw out an "over-the-top" quality from the dancers, asking them to exaggerate the movement and make it "larger than life." This is a performance moment that I feel could have been

exaggerated even more. Actually, Fisch says that “music may capture attention but probably will not sustain it if the visual that accompanies it is static” (Fisch 108).

Finally, the Step of the Day sequence relies heavily on auditory cues for the audience to follow the learning component of the scene—similar to Lesser’s suggestion that these “signal [to the viewer] that an uninteresting sequence has ended and that a new character or episode, recognized by a consistent musical signature, has begun” (Lesser 103). In this scene, after Jazzermine teaches the audience the new step of the day, the fourth wall is momentarily broken and she adds: “when you hear this sound,” cueing a sound effect, “you can do the Step of the Day too!” This cue becomes a signal for the audience, reminding them to execute this new step while inspiring learning and participation—viewers are invited to dance along. Repetition of the same sound effect marks a change in the scene and becomes a learning device; the cue encourages the audience to perform the material being presented, each time they hear it.

In the case of *Sesame Street*, Fisch and Truglio discuss how the sound in cartoons, game shows, and comedies, when applied to children’s programs, are highly “engaging traits” that “could attract a sizable audience” (xi). Similar to the use of sound effects on *Sesame Street*, those that sound during the Step of the Day reflect a game-show format. These sound cues include fast-paced, snappy sound effects and applause which takes the viewer away from the current Legwarmer setting, and into a different conceptual space—embellishing the enjoyment of being chosen to deliver the Step of the Day for Jazzermine, similarly to the sense of reward upon winning a game show.

CHAPTER FOUR

Clarity and Age Appropriate Factors

Section A: The Role of Family

Moving forward with the concept of appeal, clarity and age appropriate factors need to be taken into consideration when developing children's programming to hold and engage the audience. Fisch suggests that children's comprehension of a television program "is greater when the educational content is integral, rather than tangential, to the narrative. When the two are closely intertwined, the narrative draws viewers' attention toward the educational content" (108). More precisely, Fisch explains that "comprehension is typically stronger when the subject matter and language are: simple, direct, focused, age-appropriate, explicit rather than inferred, and concrete rather than abstract" (Fisch 108).

The concept of family traditions and genealogy can prove somewhat confusing for a young child, especially as they endeavour to understand what it means to be related and the importance of tradition. To help simplify this notion, my initial idea was to tell the story from an adult voice, teaching the younger viewer about what it means to be part of family and the traditions one upholds. However, rather than an adult character being portrayed in a parental role, I felt the humour and warmth would present itself more enticingly (and generate appeal) in the voice of a grandparent.

Therefore, upon weaving the energy of secondary characters into the work, the likability and relatable connection to the character Granmammina Legwarmer was of utmost importance to me. It seemed age appropriate; children between ages four and seven would likely have a positive attachment to the grandparents in their own lives. With a strong family theme grounding

the purpose of *The Legwarmers*, viewers can find connection to Granmammina through her quirky charm and humour, and love of her grandchildren.

Peter K. Smith, a psychologist and scholar, assures that grandparents “have an increasingly important role to play” as their relationship to the grandchild “is usually quite close and satisfying, rather than conflictual and is seen as positive and important by both generations” (Smith 1). *The Legwarmers* episode echoes this view with the character Granmammina, who has much knowledge to offer her grandchildren. For example in the scene where the Legwarmer cousins try to disentangle the family tree Modernmina is assured that Granmammina “has the answers to all this kind of stuff.”

Adding to Smith’s assertion, John Jessel, another psychology scholar, similarly views the significance of grandparents, notable with actions such as: “giving gifts, being a companion and confidant, acting as an emotional support or ‘buffer’ at times of family stress, passing on family history or national traditions, and acting as a role model for ageing” (Jessel quoted in Smith 1). Granmammina exemplifies this view as well, with her help to straighten out the Legwarmers’ conflicting opinions about family and family traditions, and by also inviting them all to dinner—this also mirrors how Grandmothers typically find their way into a grandchild’s life through the gift of their cooking and family meal times.

The concept of strong family connections is a consistent theme throughout *The Legwarmer* episodes. The idea that learning and stability can be offered by one’s family is a strong message that I work to convey in the dialogue. For example, when the Legwarmers exit the trolley to visit Granmammina, they engage with her in their own greetings indicative of their own dance discipline. Granmammina is trying to recall the last time that she has seen the

grandchildren which, in her case, seemed long ago but Modernmina acknowledges that “it was only just yesterday.” Granmamina affectionately states: “Yes! Well, don’t you know that I love you and I have to see you since yesterday, every day?”

The values (of love and support) are central in *The Legwarmers*, and were also the cornerstone of my life as a child growing up in my family. As life’s lessons were experienced, whether good or bad, it was always evident that I had a solid foundation of family to lean on. The quality of family love has followed me to this day and has naturally made its way into *The Legwarmers* as a prosocial focal point. Likewise, in a documentary about *Mister Rogers’ Neighbourhood* Rogers explains love as fundamental; moreover, he states: “Love is at the root of everything. All learning. All parenting. All relationships. Love, or the lack of it. And what we see and hear on the screen is whom we become” (Rogers in “Won’t You Be My Neighbour?”). Rosmarie Truglio, Valeria O. Lovelace, Lvelisse Segui, and Susan Scheiner. also note the importance of love in family relationships and claim “the key component of family was love; if there was no love, there was no family” (Truglio et al.75).

I felt the best way to combine learning with love was through the compelling antics of Granmamina. Granmamina brings to light the family ancestry by teaching the Legwarmers of their forefather, “The Maestro,” and helping them to identify with a past represented in their family tapestry. In her jovial manner, Granmamina dances the jig—an appropriate musical form for her elderly character—which is choreographed with simple skips and patterns, illustrating a simple barnyard dance that she invites her grandchildren to join.

Section B: Pro-Social Age-Appropriate Content

Though Granmammina may be full of laughter, and song, she is also wise in family traditions; she informs the audience that she has taught Master Allegro “everything she knows.” And in turn Master Allegro acknowledges her wisdom by asking: “Granmammina, please stay close to me while we dance, in case I forget the steps.” Granmammina Legwarmer works as a foundation to the work, stabilizing the Legwarmers’ new-found knowledge in a lovable, charismatic way. The richness of family connection and ties enlightened me in an interview with social worker, Susan Howson, adding more purpose for me to include Granmammina as a central character for the episode. Howson reinforces the value that the young viewer receives from such subject matter, stating:

Children need to be taught to stand in the authenticity of who they are, thus celebrating their uniqueness, allowing for them to show up and express the uniqueness of their family system. If television programming can teach the child the value of their family roots, not unlike the root system of a strong tree, this child can ground themselves in resiliency, and self-regulation. There is no greater sense of self than knowing where you’ve come from, what values have been passed on to you, and the importance of honouring that (Howson).

This sense of belonging to something greater comes full circle as the Legwarmers learn the Legwarmer Family Dance, which is performed yearly at The Legwarmer Ball and is important in their family legacy.

Furthermore, these views about the importance of family are reflected in scholarship on the topic of family and tradition. Professor of Anthropology, Nelson Graburn discusses the importance and meaning of tradition, building from fellow scholar and anthropologist, Alice Horner who states “tradition refers both to the process of handing down from generation to generation and some thing, custom, or thought process that is passed on over-time” (Horner quoted in Graburn 6). In reference to dance specifically, Horner goes on to say: “a multi-generational dance is an item of custom, a performance, and at the same time, such a dance is an occasion for the passing of the technique and the feeling of the performance from older to younger generations” (Horner quoted in Graburn 6).

In agreement with Horner, I included a description of tradition in a scene when Granmamina is asked by Jazzermima to explain such a complex word. In paraphrasing Horner, Granmamina responds by explaining “tradition is something that we pass along over time from one generation to the next.” Working through this teaching moment, I simplified the concept for the young viewers by incorporating examples into the dialogue. Granmamina elaborates that a tradition might include such an event as “when we all get together every year at Uncle Tony Tendu’s family picnic!” Similarly, when Folklormina makes the connection between the annual family picnic and the legacy of the annual family Legwarmer Ball, Granmamina exclaims “Yes, Folklormina! You’ve got it!”

Whereas some educational children’s programs focus on scholastic curriculum such as *Blue’s Clues* and the aforementioned *Sesame Street*, other programs also consider pro-social programming a primary focus. Difficult social concepts such as death, grief, divorce and pregnancy have all been topics of discussion in various programs such as *Mister Rogers*

Neighbourhood as well as *Sesame Street*. While *The Legwarmers* episodes have not touched on these critical issues as of yet, it does address parents' higher rated pro-social concerns such as problem solving and expressions of self through language, as Carlee Gosser recommends (41).

Through the medium of *The Legwarmers*, audiences are learning to understand an expression of the body and forms of non-verbal communication that they may come to embody. Presenting the Step of the Day is one component of the program to offer learning a movement vocabulary. Furthermore, the viewer also associates each character with a movement style, a voice of their own, and can therefore learn that it is through these expressions that the characters interact with each other and ultimately accept one another. I feel that teaching the value of acceptance and inclusion led by example is imperative as these young children learn to make friendships and interactions with peers in their early school years.

As children move in and out of daily social interaction, they are challenged with conflicts, making their way towards learning the skills of peaceful conflict resolution. Social interaction from character to character is a vital component of learning, as Fisch suggests (108). Indeed, Fisch recalls the research of Read and Miller, explaining that:

Social interaction plays a central role in human existence, and stories (whether factual or fictional) are fundamentally about social interaction. Stories on television are no different and a great deal of research indicates that children are sensitive to the social aspects of television programs (Fisch 108).

To support this notion Fisch explains that “because of its extensive portrayals of emotion and interaction, television provides children with a rich source of learning about emotions” (Fisch 108). Put simply, children learn by observation, and seeing positive social interaction or problem solving on television helps to process how one can approach similar situations that arise in their own lives.

Choreographically, these social interactions are made throughout the work. Examples of these moments can be seen in the Trolley dance as the Legwarmers move through each other during the hand reel, as well as the duet of Ballermina and Tappermina and trio of Folklormina, Modernmina, and Jazzermina, complimenting each other in different dance forms. Similarly, Granmammina physically greets each one of the Legwarmers in their own discipline, as though they share a “secret handshake.” And in the final family dance, the contracted and angular movement style of the Maestro is implemented choreographically as he tries to communicate his frustrations to his dancing clowns. With the exception of the Maestro, these various dance sequences evoke a certain quality of playfulness, commonly seen among children. When visualizing a playful interaction, one learns by example the positive playful nature for which to address their own peers on the playground, or the playful respect for which to address their elders. In the case of the Maestro demonstrating frustration, there is an opportunity here for the young viewer to learn empathy and how individuals can experience anger and frustration, hopefully learning to self-regulate, moving towards a resolution.

CHAPTER FIVE

The Convention of Formal Features

My learning curve in utilizing formal features was greatly impacted when experiencing the editing phase of the production. I was astounded at how meaning and cohesion of dialogue or choreography was greatly altered when edited with multiple cuts, or montage sequences. In some cases, multiple frequent cuts were excessive which evoked a sense of confusion or hurried action, and in other ways, cutting away quickly added to the timely humour or infused energy into a scene.

The use of what Fisch calls “formal features” when filming television can help to aid in a child’s comprehension of the narrative as well as with any educational components (109). In a specific example, Fisch explains “a close-up or pan can direct children’s attention to a specific, relevant object or part of an object” (Fisch 109). Strategic cuts require a bit more care, from frame to frame these need to be edited smoothly so as not to jar the audience with too many perspectives or points of view. This can be rather difficult for young audiences when trying to focus on the event being portrayed on the screen, confusing comprehension, and subsequently, losing the audience altogether.

I have noticed that in today’s fast-paced environment, children are adopting a sensational need for instant gratification. It seems that the quality of patience is minimal, and more diagnoses of Attention Deficit Disorders (ADD) are commonly seen in youth. I have seen in my own children that maximum screen time in front of television shows and action packed movies—with formal features such as multiple cuts and fades—negatively impacts this ability to focus attention over longer periods of time and disallows for the brain to find its own calm.

Carlee Gosser's thesis on child development, entitled *What Are the Children Watching? A Look Into the Pacing and Learning of Children's Television*, draws from Hughes to discuss the mind's ability to process through "the cognitive regulatory system that helps guide behaviour in an appropriate manner[.]" which Gosser refers to as "executive functioning" (Quoted in Gosser 16). Gosser assures that this is a particularly crucial skill for school-age children to develop (16). This function is imperative at a young age, as the child begins school, "because schools require children to follow directions, control impulses, transition between activities and focus attention on pertinent information" (Gosser 16). A fast paced show tends to use an excessive amount of cuts and scene changes, multiple auditory changes and use of quick active motion and active talking.

Similarly Gosser notes the findings of Angeline Lillard and Jennifer Peterson who suggest that when subjecting four year olds to a fast-paced program with an average of eleven seconds per scene change, their executive functioning became immediately impaired following the viewing (Gosser 15). For this reason, shows like *Sesame Street*, or *Mister Rogers Neighbourhood* normally adopted a slow paced format in order to allot for the necessary time it takes for the young viewer to process the educational components and pro-social messages within the content of the show (Gosser 14).

The informative research from these various scholars enabled me to observe *The Legwarmers* episode in a new light when in the editing suite. I was careful to make selections that had a stable focal point that helped to increase focus and comprehension in the viewer. When editing choreography, particularly the Trolley Dance, Zlatko had chosen multiple cuts and angles at first to employ various points of view for the choreography. Where these choices were

in line with my original vision, when observing the work with these editing choices, I decided to scale back the amount of varying points of view to allow for more cohesion and clarity to visually take in the choreographic sequences. Similarly, these same choices were also made when viewing and editing the Family Dance choreography. I quickly learned that “less meant more” not only in choreographic choices, but in editing angles and points of view as well.

The Legwarmers in: Finding Family Roots uses various formal features to help accommodate both appeal and learning for the viewer. Firstly, the entire work was shot in a blue screen studio with the intent of adding in the artwork, drawn by Emma Bramma Smith, in post-production. In some ways this made working with props a challenge as we constantly needed to hide some of the props (such as the chairs and table) from the camera by covering them in blue so that these objects could be drawn and added in to the work in the post-production phase. Consideration of what is seen and what is not seen was a constant factor in the visualization of the end product while shooting.

The action sequences that include slapstick humour or movement in the dialogue, such as the opening scene on the trolley, move at a faster pace with more cuts than the educational sequence needed to translate the Step of the Day. In this scene, these faster paced choices helped to make the humour more successful as Tappermina is jostled from one Legwarmer to the next. Fast forward sequences were purposefully used to speed up the action. These choices are notable in this scene, particularly when the Legwarmers all pile on to the trolley, in a hurried pace as they are all running late for their dance rehearsal. In the scene where Granmamina is explaining the history of the Maestro’s Family Dance, she recalls the family dance choreography of the clowns running into the Maestro and falling to the floor like a domino effect. This sequence employed

the formal feature of the fast forward effect both during her recall, and in the actual presentation of the family dance. Repetition, here, acts to remind the young audience of the scene already played out by Granmamina, while displaying it in its intended choreographic form.

Choreographically, there were also formal filming features that I had wanted to use especially when filming *The Trolley Dance*. My choreographic goal for this work was for the camera to see the choreography in different shot-sizes and angles from within the trolley car in which the dance took place. Unlike the Fred Astaire approach, where the entire dance was to be shot in one take with frontal camera positioning, and body in full form, I decided to use Gene Kelly's approach to filming dance, working with multiple angles and points of view. Judy Mitoma, Professor of Dance in the Department of World Arts and Cultures at UCLA, explains how Gene Kelly used formal features "from the back, and at oblique angles, turning and cutting to aim from all four points of the compass. In each case, the viewer got what Kelly felt was the optimal view of the dancer's gestures" (Mitoma 74)

Like Kelly, my aim was to keep the movement energetic with different points of view to add extra flare, yet, not too fragmented with an overabundance of camera angles to tell this "mini" dance story effectively. I agreed with his artistic notion that one must consider "the most advantageous angle. You can't always be turning and facing one way" (Quoted in Mitoma 74). However, unlike Kelly's choreographic choices, I did not have the ability to choreograph on a Hollywood set where I could shoot 360 degrees around the dancer while working with a green screen studio; though, I am hopeful that this technique can be employed in the next iteration. Thus my choice of angles needed to be strategically laid out for a small space that made sense for

the camera. Collaboration with filmmakers Zlatko Cetinić, and Jonah Blaser helped bring this strategy to life.

When choreographing the Trolley Dance, I wanted to keep the choreography versatile, in standing and seated sections, to add various (visual) levels to the work. On the whole, my choreographic objective was to keep the piece fairly versed in a jazz genre of dance, with moments highlighting each character—as in the ballet and tap duet sequence with Ballerina and Jazzermina, a small seated solo section of Folklormina, and a quick trio of Jazzermina, Folklormina, and Modernmina in their various dance forms. These subtleties added slight character differences, while the overall choreographed jazz genre unifies them. In short, my intent was for it to resemble a mini-production number from a musical.

Like musical theatre the story is embedded in the choreography. In staying true to the narrative, upon Folklormina's exclamation: "Look! I see our GRANMA'S!" the scene gives the viewer a quick introduction to Grandmamina Legwarmer while approaching her neighbourhood. Multiple cuts were necessary, cutting shots of Grandmamina noticing the trolley while she watches through her kitchen window, followed by Grandmamina exiting her home to meet up with the Legwarmers. As they exit the trolley car to encircle Grandma, the background was required to change mid-choreography to indicate the exterior of the trolley car. Essentially, this scene required the visual artist, Emma Smith, to create new work and multiple points of view for both the interior and the exterior of the trolley car which would be added in post-production, and corresponding with Zlatko's camera angles. Many renditions of the artwork were drawn in order to facilitate this continuity.

Keeping in line with Kelly's idea of 360 degree shooting, I wanted a bird's eye-view of the dancers while they danced in chairs, in order to film sequences of movement that I had choreographed in a canon specifically for this purpose in rehearsal. Busby Berkeley, an American filmmaker of the 1930s, was famous for his inventive integration of the kalaeidescope effect. This was a formal feature known as "the top-shot technique" that filmed the dancers from the top with an overhead shot, and caught the dancers on film dancing simple patterns, similar to the patterns created by a kalaeidescope. My vision was to create a scaled-down version of Busby Berkeley's kalaeidescope effect. Specifically what Imogen Sara Smith describes as:

The fluid way he marshaled hundreds of performers, along with moving sets, revolving turntables, traveling crane shots, wind and water, light and shadow, resulted in unsurpassed marvels. (All were achieved with a single camera; Berkeley planned his continuity and editing in advance.) Alternating extreme long-shots with extreme close-ups as well as filming dancers from below through glass floors, underwater, and in tracking shots, Berkeley celebrated the freedom of cinema to conquer space. His camera really does dance (Smith 3).

Though Zlatko did make use of a ladder to take the shot from a higher angle, we were not able to have any drone cameras set from up above as planned initially—due to the studio ceiling being too low. With the ceiling's available height, we were not capable of fitting all the dancers into the shot from a bird's eye-view perspective, and so we settled with a high angle instead. The

end result was not exactly as I had envisioned; however, the successive movement plays out quite well on film.

Another formal feature convention that I employed was the use of repetition. Repetition and longer pauses help the viewer to process the information and allows for them to follow along by repeating the action, participating, or answering a question out loud. This convention is used frequently in *Sesame Street*, in *Mickey Mouse Clubhouse*, and *Blues Clues*. In fact, it became known by its creators as The James Earl Jones effect. On *Sesame Street*, James Earl Jones presented the letters of the alphabet to the audience very slowly with significant pausing, before and after saying each letter as the visual of the letter appeared beside him. Eventually, children caught on and began to repeat the letters after him, during the pause, until sequencing became apparent and they were able to call out the next consecutive letter before James did. Through repetition they learned the sequence of the alphabet from A to Z. Where this feature would seem monotonous to an educated adult, young audiences in early childhood gain knowledge from its repetition and simplistic approach. Indeed, Gladwell states: “An adult considers constant repetition boring, because it requires reliving the same experience over and again. But to preschoolers repetition isn’t boring, because each time they watch something they are experiencing it in a completely different way” (128).

Blues Clues adopted this same technique. The lead character known as Joe asked the audience while facing directly into the camera various questions pertaining to Blue, and waited for long pauses for children to respond to their screens. Similarly, Mickey Mouse asks the audience to help him decide which Mickey Mouse “tool” to use to help solve the problem, and

awaits an audience response. In all cases, the audience is invited to participate, but also to apply cognitive learning.

Much like *Sesame Street*'s Letter of the Day segment, *The Legwarmers* episodes include The Step of the Day in the show's format. Strategically placing the segment about a quarter of the way into the episode, allowing for the new movement vocabulary to be repeated two more times after it is presented—usually the last time being the final exclamation point of the program. The segment is deliberately shot from the front with very few cut away shots to illustrate the look of a dance teacher speaking to her students in a studio. The beauty of presenting this work through a digital media format such as television is that it offers a private form of simple practice and learning—in contrast to the experience of sometimes feeling self-conscious when learning a new physical vocabulary in front of other peers. As Lesser suggests, “[the young viewer] can control [their] involvement simply by flipping a switch, turning the set on or off, at [their] own discretion” and in that way “[t]elevision's impersonality removes the constant threat of humiliation” (22).

Presented in a game-show format, the Legwarmers are purposefully excited when they have been chosen to present the Step of the Day—almost as though they have won a big prize. This instills the idea that teaching is just as much fun as learning. When presenting this new material to the viewer, the fourth wall is broken—similar to the *Blues Clues* technique (that I discuss in Chapter 1)—and a purposeful pause is held in the delivery of the dialogue, as the presenter tells the viewer to wait for a special sound. During this pause the Legwarmers listen with their hand to their ears as a sound cue is given to execute the step. In the repetitious moments to follow, children can learn to tune-in on an auditory level for the cue while the

Legwarmers stop what they are doing to reorganize themselves in front of the camera again.

This rearranging time also allows for the viewer to assemble themselves in front of the television to execute the Step of the Day. The goal with the use of repetition is that a new piece of dance vocabulary is learned and, in turn, the viewer receives a fun reward by participating.

CHAPTER SIX: EDITING MEANING AND TESTING OUT THE TARGET AUDIENCE

In the final editing phase of *The Legwarmers: in Finding Family Roots*, an assortment of edits, cuts, and other necessary changes were made for various reasons. Some were made to evoke more meaning, some to evoke more humour, and some to keep sections concise for attention purposes.

Upon viewing the opening scene of the episode with the Legwarmers discussing the upcoming Family Legwarmer Ball, I instantly loved the bright colours of the artwork infused with the bright colours of the dancers' costumes. Visually it reminded me of candy and all things sweet. However, despite the need for fast action cut away shots for this age groups, I had asked Zlatko to diminish the amount of cuts and angles used, to quiet the snappy action as it was difficult to administer focus from the viewer, and use the angles that were more aesthetically flattering for movement. Perhaps it was my habitual nature of performing in a live theatre medium; however, I still preferred to use more angles taken from the front similar to a proscenium stage. In most cases, it made more sense visually and ensured everyone was in the frame providing a balance and symmetry. As the bus scene develops, I was extremely happy to see how Zlatko had animated the exterior of the bus through its windows to make it seem as though the bus was moving. He was adamant about adding this visual to accommodate setting and space, and though it was a gruelling and tedious task, it made for a necessary effect. I had also chosen multiple cartoon sound effects for Zlatko to add into the opening action at specific moments that accentuated the slapstick moments which came across very effectively, as well as gave it that cartoon feel.

Problems arose when masking the blue screen. Although the costumes were not blue, certain costumes such as Jazzermana's purple costume, and Tappermina's pink dress still had blue hues within them that caused for them to look as though they were disappearing into the backdrop. This task was also laborious working from scene to scene to ensure that the dancer was properly separated from the background. Furthermore, the furniture also posed its own challenges. In filming, we had purposefully covered all the chairs with blue fabric so that they would disappear into the blue screen behind them, intending them to be masked with the artwork in post-production. Unfortunately, this component of the artwork needed more time to come to fruition as the perspective drawn did not quite line up with the needs of the scenes. Chairs are used in various sections on the trolley, in the choreography, and at Granmamina's dinner table, in various angles and perspectives, and there was not enough time to allot for all the geometric perspective-driven intricacies to fulfill each scene. It was through this learning curve, that Zlatko came to realize a better way to execute this challenge in the future. Instead of multiple drawings, frame by frame, he has suggested that we build a miniature diorama of each set needed, complete with the furniture and backgrounds of each scene. He will then film the diorama on its own, and scale it to size on video for it to become part of the Legwarmer set. In this way, the artwork is still true to the look of *The Legwarmer* set and the furniture can become more mobile when working in the editing suite.

In future iterations, Zlatko has suggested that we employ the use of the software SynthEyes—which can address the future problems of tracking our production. SynthEyes, Zlatko informed us, is a program for 3-D camera tracking, also known as match-moving. Some of the dance movements would be more dynamic if we were to use moving cameras. According

to Zlatko, using SynthEyes means we can look at the image sequence from our live-action shoot and actually know how the real camera(s) moved during the shoot, what the camera's field of view (focal length) was, and where various locations were in 3-D, so that we can create illustrations that exactly fit into our shot. SynthEyes is widely used for film, television, commercial, and music video post-production—but for us the program was cost prohibitive at this point in time. In the future when budget allows, we would use SynthEyes to help insert animated creatures or vehicles; stabilize shaky conventional shots or capture body motion to drive computer-generated characters.

The choreography on the trolley was successfully shot at various angles making it fast action with various cutaways from the dancers to Granmammina, advancing the story as was the purpose, while keeping it fun and uptempo. The transition into Granmammina's house to follow was beautifully edited as Zlatko used the picture of Granmammina's front window to shoot through, taking us from exterior to the interior of her kitchen. The opening of the Dinner Dance sequence flowed well; however, I was a little unsure as to how to present the idea of multiple dancing feet moving underneath the table at the end of the piece. We realized that we did not have a shot that had everyone's feet dancing at the same time in close up. This was due to the dancers sitting at various angles in the chairs, so instead, our shots included a trio of dancing jazz shoes, flamenco shoes, and bare feet, and two solo moments of tap shoes and ballet shoes, each exemplifying their own form of dance. Zlatko had suggested that we divide the screen into a split screen effect to showcase the various dancing feet, and in viewing the edit I thought it so impressive that we repeated the section to lengthen it. In retrospect, this inspiration had me wondering how to develop this idea further in upcoming episodes.

Granmammina's explanation of family proved to be quirky with her humorous characterization. To add to the scene, I had asked Zlatko to use the instrumental version of Jerry Bock's *Tradition* from *Fiddler on the Roof* to accompany Granmammina's speech on family tradition. The dramatics of this piece competently added to her humour by way of juxtaposition and over exaggeration. In the final section of the Maestro's Family Dance, the prologue of the work begins with gloved feet communicating to each other in their own choreographic way. The synchronization of this section worked better in rehearsal, than it did when filming. When filming this section, the dancers needed to have a blue sheet over them in order to camouflage them into the blue background and in so doing this disoriented them somewhat, hindering them from being exactly in tune with each other choreographically. I had felt that the Maestro's Family Dance was too long when seeing the first edited version and so I asked Zlatko to take out an entire minute of the choreography that included a parody of the *Dance of the Cygnets* of *Swan Lake*. I did not feel that the humour was reading effectively as it seemed to drag, and I also felt it unnecessary to include since it was unlikely that this young audience would understand the parody or have any connection to the original Lev Ivanov version. Upon viewing the presentation in front of the young audience I still feel that the length of the choreography could be shortened so as to hold the young audience's attention a little more effectively.

The grade one audience sat riveted through the presentation of the episode. While they laughed at various sections, they particularly enjoyed the Step of the Day component and the character of Granmammina. They were familiar with the Step of the Day from having introduced the component with the children in a four-week workshop setting prior to the viewing of the episode. At the end of the presentation, Granmammina's character made a live appearance and

helped to dance the Step of the Day sequence with the children. They were astounded at how Granmammina executed the transition from video performance to live performance and seemed to allow for that moment to carry its own magic. The teachers had deemed the work highly entertaining, and when asked if they could utilize this work along with a dance syllabus created for their classroom, educator Susan Speer's response was: "this programming allows for students to explore their own vocabulary of movement which is the basis for the Ontario Curriculum in the elementary levels." Ms. Beverly Pinto, another grade one teacher commented that she felt "*The Legwarmers* can be used to help children develop characters as part of the drama curriculum as well. Since your workshops with the children, I have already used the Step of the Day in the classroom to help with transitions within the classroom and to help break the monotony of the children's learning, adding movement to their schoolday."

While the credits rolled to a salsa beat in the video, I encouraged all grade ones to join in on a Conga line with Granmammina at the helm, leading the children around the gymnasium in a pied piper fashion of music, dance and fun. The smiling faces of the children as they processed and danced through the gym made the entire experience rewarding, reiterating the mission statement of *The Legwarmer* Legacy: Encouraging life lessons through dance, and with one's family surrounding them, one can accomplish anything.

CHAPTER SEVEN: FUTURE PROSPECTS

Authored by Christine and Lisa Brkich, the first published book of *The Legwarmers in Plies and Pleases* is already in print. The continuation of our literary work would include publishing more books to add to *The Legwarmers* series. However, in a digital format, the future prospects for *The Legwarmers* episodes can take on many different forms in this multi-disciplinary age.

First, the goal is to gain a broader audience. The benefit of *The Legwarmers* being a dance focused work is that it addresses an educative objective for teachers who are required to teach dance as part of the school curriculum. When speaking to school teachers, a common complaint I hear involves a need for more dance education. A school teacher that I interviewed states: “I would love to integrate more dance into my classroom curriculum but I just don’t know how because I lack the skills” (Speer). The plan for *The Legwarmers* project is to devise a syllabus that coincides with the television program, whereby teachers can draw from the material as needed in order to help make dance more accessible and teachable in their classroom every day or weekly schedules.

This will be designed as an online, password protected resource for teachers, in a format where they will be taught dance age-appropriate vocabulary, sequences and some history based on the grade-level. As an option, these grade-level materials will include the possibility for the students to dance along with *The Legwarmers* on the television screen while learning deeper engagement in the experience through a class-by-class series. Alternatively, the students may simply be instructed by the teacher without the use of the program on screen. In essence, the idea is to better equip the teacher and minimize their anxiety in increasing qualitative dance

education, while promoting a profound love of dance within students. Currently, the Ontario School Curriculum divides the dance curriculum into necessary categories known as: “BERST” (Body, Energy, Relationship, Space, and Time). The Legwarmer syllabus for classroom sessions will be designed to address the needs of the Ontario School Dance Curriculum for fully integrated application purposes. At the end of the dance session an episode of *The Legwarmers* can be viewed in classroom as a reward for their dance achievements. For local schools, an in-class workshop or performance in the school can also be integrated into the program, so that students and teachers can experience hands-on learning with the characters in a live format.

As children and parents so often compete for screen time among their various devices, parents need the reassurance that what children are watching and playing online is safe. In conjunction with the work, The Legwarmer App for Kids will be developed to ensure safe learning and gaming at the primary level. Simple concepts like matching the correct dance shoe to the correct character will provide connection to the characters, lessons about multiple dance disciplines, and increase awareness of the artistic dance world around the child.

Finally, in a televised format, the forthcoming episodes of *The Legwarmers* may include the new interactive television opportunities for kids, as seen on Netflix. Similar to the concept of “Choose Your Own Adventure” books that were popular in the 1980s, Netflix explains, “in each interactive title, you can make choices for the characters, shaping the story as you go! Each choice leads to a different adventure, so you can watch again and again, and see a new story each time” (Martin 1). Further, Carla Engelbrecht Fisher, Director of Product Innovation, observes that children have a sense that everything is touchable and interactive now, that it is the way they

view the world. This realization brought creators to the idea that “kids would enjoy the possibility of actually interacting with these programs” (Martin 1).

Yet, the challenge of creating such work would involve filming multiple storylines in order to action a choice for the viewer. As suggested above, this could allow the viewer to feel that they are creating the story as it unfolds. Such a proposal could require a lot of time and therefore be more costly; however, I find the innovation behind the work creatively inspiring.

In summary, the creation of *The Legwarmers in Finding Family Roots* was a learning process that adopted various technical conventions for creating entertaining and educating television, specifically those posed by Shalom Fisch. The convention of appeal was broken down into many parts including the utilization of humour, both in slapstick and clowning techniques, while the visual action versus dialogue was balanced between the choreography and dialogue. *The Legwarmers* exemplifies a wide range of characters across the OCEAN personality trait spectrum (Little in “Who Are You Really? The Puzzle of Personality”), accompanied by the quirky secondary characters of Granmammina Legwarmer and the Maestro. The utilization of music was carefully composed in collaboration with Erik Geddis to add mood, emotion, rhythm, and comprehension to the narrative with a versatile underscore.

Fisch also poses the intelligent use of conventions, such as clarity and age appropriateness as well as the effective use of formal features, to help bring a television episode to success. Following these conventions, *The Legwarmers in: Finding Family Roots*, uses age appropriateness to speak to the child directly; teaching unfolds through the voice and character of Granmammina Legwarmer. Moreover, the Step of the Day component works to teach age

appropriate dance vocabulary to a young audience and invites audience participation in order to encourage engagement and learning through fun. The episode uses the formal features of moderate pacing throughout the work so as not to over-stimulate the viewer, and faster pacing when necessary to add to the slapstick humour in fast forward motion. Multiple camera angles are used to assist the choreography, allowing for increased interest by shifting the point of view and using appropriate shot-sizes to best highlight the various segments of choreography. Longer pauses and use of repetition during the Step of the Day sequence help to encourage learning while breaking the fourth wall, inviting the audience to participate with the Legwarmer family.

Judging from the young audience reactions, these conventions proved accurate and useful as a foundational component from which to build engaging television for young audiences. It is my hope that I will continue to learn how to connect to young audiences through this medium as I create additional episodes in *The Legwarmers* series. Staying competitive both artistically and technologically to meet these young minds is essential moving forward. I do so mindfully, not merely to offer audiences a new television program to engage with, but to open their young eyes to the fascinating world of dance and a loving family that awaits them at the push of a button.

~WE need to help our children become more and more aware that what is essential in life, is invisible to the eye. ~ Fred Rogers

End Notes

1. The statistics state: “Almost all homes (95%) with children ages zero to six have at least one VCR or DVD player. In a typical day, about half of all children this age (46%) will watch a video or DVD, and according to their parents, one in four (25%) watch videos every day (Rideout et al. 13).

2. Dr. Shalom Fisch is the president and founder of MediaKidz Research and Consulting. The mandate of the firm is to provide educational content development for children’s media companies. Fisch was also vice president for program research at the *Sesame Workshop* for fifteen years, overseeing curriculum development, formative research, and summative research for various television series, outreach projects, school-age magazines, and interactive material for online and CD-ROMs. He is an adjunct professor at Fordham University and New York University, where he also received his PhD in experimental/developmental psychology.

3. Fisch and Truglio draw support to their argument by referencing a research study conducted by Luecke-Aleksa, Anderson, Collins, & Schmitt (1995) on same-sex models that shows similar results—regarding children’s attraction to and identification with like models (238).

4. Also see Bryant and Vorderer (2006) and Maccoby and Wilson (1957) for similar studies of children and identification through media, the results of which support Fisch and Truglio’s (2014) and Cohen’s (2001) arguments for the influential roles of television characters.

5. Brian Little breaks down the theory of Trait Psychology, aligning an individual along these five dimensions (Little in “Who Are You Really? The Puzzel of Personality”).

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Appendix A: Research Questions

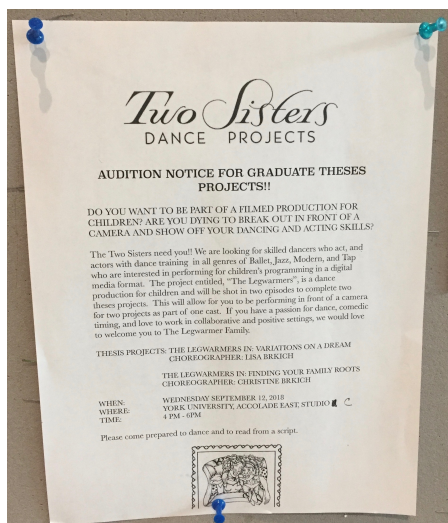
Questions asked to elementary school teachers for research purposes regarding the in-school Legwarmer workshop/master classes:

1. Was this class workshop helpful to cover curriculum focused material?
2. If this workshop were in an online video resource, directed towards teachers, would you be able to implement the material in your classroom?
3. If so, how often would you make it part of your classroom curriculum?

Questions posed to elementary school teachers in regards to the final performance:

1. Was this performance episode engaging for the class?
2. How was the pace of the episode? Too fast? Or not fast enough?
3. Which were the moments that stood out?
4. Was the storyline direct and easy enough to comprehend for this age group? Any additional comments or thoughts?

Appendix B: The Audition



Appendix C: Getting Into Character





Appendix D: The Artwork



Appendix E: The Film Shoot



Appendix F: Voice Over Recordings



Appendix G: Final Edits: On The Trolley



Appendix H: The Step Of The Day



Appendix I: Prologue and Final Family Dance



Appendix J: The Performance

