

Cover Story

4

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It was the best—and worst—of times for world-famous puppeteer, producer, musician, actress and ventriloquist Shari Lewis, during early production on her new daytime children's series, "The Charlie Horse Music Pizza."

Geared to youngsters ages 3 to 8, the mix-em-up people-and-puppet series, which debuts Monday on PBS, is basically musical comedy, devoted to music education.

Although most of the series is produced in Vancouver—in association with Golden Books Family Entertainment and KCET-TV Channel 28—the outdoor scenes were filmed on Leo Carrillo Beach in Malibu. And on these August days, heralding El Niño, the surf was riding high.

On the bright side, the sequence that will open each episode went swimmingly, with flame-haired Lewis and cast—including her classic puppet trio of Lamb Chop, Hush Puppy and, of course, Charlie Horse—standing out on a big rock near shore, waving jauntily. Only after they were finished did waves wash away a portion of the beach near the rock.

On the tense side, the ocean was so frenzied that the crew kept having to move production scrims farther and farther up the beach. At one point, waves lapped at video monitors that Lewis had been using under the main set. Excitement still in her voice, she told visitors later, "I was in there under that table with two monitors, and the water was flooding in. I could have gotten electrocuted."

Not a day at the beach. But that's where she was because kids dig the beach, and thus it was deemed an entertaining setting for introducing some educational messages.

Also featured in the glossy "Charlie Horse Music Pizza" is a skate-boarding orangutan named Take Out (played by Chanz Perry) and a large, royal blue and white raccoon puppet called Fingers (the voice of Gord Robertson, sounding very much like Jackie Mason).

Dom DeLuise, who made his television debut in 1960 on NBC's Saturday morning "The Shari Show," co-stars as chef Cookie, and Wesley Morris, 18, in real life a concert pianist,

plays Jupior, the pizzeria's assistant music manager. As for Lewis, besides being the voices of her puppet threesome, she is simply Shari, the pizzeria's owner and operator.

Over lunch in her trailer, Lewis, who has 12 Emmys—half of them for her previous PBS series, "Lamb Chop's Play-Along"—says flatly that she created "Music Pizza" because "school systems have virtually eliminated music education from their curriculum. And I was brought up to be a musician by a mother who was not only a music teacher [but also] one of the six music coordinators for the New York City board of education. She taught teachers how to teach music.

"My mother always felt," continues Lewis, herself a violinist and conductor, "that music was not just important

for the heart and the spirit and the aesthetics of it, but for the neural synapses, the connections that are caused when you play a musical instrument. You grow smarter by playing a musical instrument.

"We're not doing a show about musical appreciation," Lewis emphasizes, "because kids appreciate music. They love music. But they think music is something one buys. You go to a store and then you put it in your ears and listen to it. They don't have a sense of their own ability to play an instrument. And so what we're doing is opening up that potential."

Of course, Lewis knows that a series can't directly teach an instrument, but it can inspire interest. And she notes that the series does explain some of music's basic principles—what makes notes go high and low, the

musical alphabet from A to G, scales and the rudiments of reading music.

Altogether, the \$8.5-million series—20 episodes this season, 20 more due in the fall—has 66 new songs. "Every day we're doing a musical comedy," says Lewis. "Every day is a full plot with three or four songs, and the plot is moved forward with the songs, and there's music education built into each show."

Its lessons, she says, flow naturally out of the story line.

In the opening show, children learn about quarter notes, half notes and bars of music. In the second episode, they learn that a ukulele has four basic strings, and that when you tighten strings, the sound it makes goes higher, and when you loosen them, the sound goes lower. In the third, they get a glimpse—through using an empty tuna can, a stretched balloon and material such as paper clips for filler—of how a drum is made.

As for story inspiration, Lewis says simply: "We [asked] ourselves, 'What do kids like? What do they like best?' They like music, they like pizza, they like to be at the beach.

"And so we put it all together. We decided to run a pizzeria on the beach, which becomes a hangout for kids who like to listen to music, to move to music, to make music. In other words, it's 'Cheers' for kids. Only what we serve is music of all kinds. We're dealing with country music, with opera—we're doing a big show about opera—with classical, with rock. There's no kind of music we intend to ignore."

As disciplined a personality as she is peripatetically peppy, Lewis adds that "what we're really doing is role modeling. We're showing my Lamb Chop, Charlie Horse, Hush Puppy, the orangutan, plus some live kids—we're showing kids singing together, learning what harmony is, picking up instruments, being willing to be bad [at it]."

Among the songs is one by Ken and Mitzie Welch called, "You Got to Play Bad Before You can Play Good." Says Lewis: "It's about practicing, that you must tolerate the wrong notes, the wrong sounds—before you can make good music.

"The Charlie Horse Music Pizza" airs weekdays at 8 a.m. on KCET.

They've Got the Music in Them

BY JUDITH MICHAELSON TIMES STAFF WRITER



HUSH PUP, SWEET LAMB CHOP: Series regular Dom DeLuise, left, helps 12-time Emmy winner Shari Lewis and her pals, an orangutan named Take Out and Jupior, the pizza parlor's assistant manager, to debut "The Charlie Horse Music Pizza."

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