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Review

Mr. Dressup to Degrassi: 42 Years of Legendary Toronto Kids TV.
Museum of Toronto, Toronto, Ontario. May 24 – September 24, 2023.
Curated by Ed Conroy.

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Mr. Dressup to Degrassi: 42 Years of Legendary Toronto Kids TV.
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This past fall, an exhibition space in the basement of the 401 Richmond Centre in Toronto, Ontario, was transformed into a time machine that took attendees back into the colourful past of Toronto children's television programming. Judging by the enthusiasm and excitement of my fellow attendees, the exhibit scratched a nostalgic itch. I saw many people who looked to be in their 40s or 30s gleefully reminiscing with each other about the television shows of their childhoods. Beyond the nostalgia, there was a message about the importance of audiovisual archival materials in understanding our history and who we are.

Museum of Toronto's exhibition *Mr. Dressup to Degrassi: 42 Years of Legendary Toronto Kids TV* brought together audiovisual and ephemeral archival materials with contextual writing and contemporary oral histories to transport attendees into a nostalgic space full of Toronto cultural content.¹ The exhibit was infused with a sense of fun and nostalgia and had lots of interactive activities for attendees. The materials were displayed chronologically, drawing attention to their historical context, and the exhibit put audiovisual archival material and ephemera front and centre, making a solid case for giving these records

1 Readers may be more familiar with this organization under its previous name, Myseum of Toronto. In early 2024, the organization announced that it was changing its name to Museum of Toronto as part of an "ongoing commitment to accurately reflect the city of Toronto and its growing residents and further represent itself as Toronto's city museum." For more information, refer to the press release, dated April 2, 2024: [https://www.myseumoftoronto.com/collection/press-releases-and-media/2024-04-02/#:~:text=Toronto%2C%20ON%20\(April%20%2C,itself%20as%20Toronto's%20city%20museum](https://www.myseumoftoronto.com/collection/press-releases-and-media/2024-04-02/#:~:text=Toronto%2C%20ON%20(April%20%2C,itself%20as%20Toronto's%20city%20museum)



FIGURE 1 Introductory display for the exhibit. Photo by Rebecca Tisdelle-Macias.

Source: Photo courtesy of Museum of Toronto.

of cultural productions targeting children an integral place in documenting Toronto's past.

The exhibit was curated by Ed Conroy, who runs the Retrontario project. With a few notable exceptions, most of the material in the exhibit was drawn from Retrontario's digital and physical collections. Retrontario is primarily an online digital archive, although it does hold some physical assets. It seeks to preserve, celebrate, and research recent Ontario history and popular culture, primarily by posting digitized Ontario television content on its website and various social media channels. Most of Retrontario's content "is sourced from located or donated VHS and Betamax tapes that contained material recorded off television in the 1970s, 1980s, 1990s and early 2000s."² Thus, Retrontario presents an opportunity for Ontarians to play a part in documenting their television history by contributing material – which in some cases could be the only copies – to the collection.

2 Retrontario, "About Retrontario," accessed January 10, 2024, <https://retrontario.com/about/>.

The exhibit featured clips from a wide variety of shows, such as *Mr. Dressup*, *Today's Special*, and the various iterations of *Degrassi*; the between-show clips from the YTV channel; and videos of contemporary interviews with performers such as Phil Guerrero ("PJ Phil" of YTV) and Nerene Virgin (Jodie on *Today's Special*). These were accompanied by photos and artifacts. Viewed together, the materials built a comprehensive snapshot of the children's television industry in the latter half of the 20th century. There were also interactive components that asked attendees to write their reactions and thoughts as well as opportunities for attendees to pose for pictures interacting with replica puppets.

Each section of the exhibit covered a different decade. The sections were marked by large, stacked cardboard blocks that mimicked children's building blocks. Contextual information about political and socio-cultural issues and television shows from each decade was printed on the sides of the blocks. The blocks representing the 1950s located Toronto as a hub for children's television, beginning in 1952, with the launch of CBC Television's flagship Ontario English-language television service, CBLT-DT; described the demographic make-up of Toronto, including how many Torontonians owned televisions; and discussed the show *Mr. Dressup* in detail. The blocks representing the 1970s described the increasingly diverse cultural context both in Toronto and in the kinds of television stations and programming produced; and discussed educational programming such as *Polka Dot Door*, *Tell Me a Story*, *Read All About It!*, and *The Body Works*. The information on these blocks demonstrated how programming geared for children was both a product and a reflection of the cultural context.

An important organizing feature of the exhibit was a large timeline – from 1952 to 1995 – that took up one of the walls. The timeline was peppered with archival photographs, drawn mostly from CBC, the City of Toronto Archives, and TVOntario, with a few from other archives like Library and Archives Canada and the NASA Archives. The timeline included important historical events, cultural moments in Canada and Toronto, and the broadcast debuts of many television shows – from CBC's *Uncle Chichimus* (1952) to YTV's *Afterschool Zone* (1991). Just like the blocks, the timeline connected historical events – such as the Vietnam War, the opening of Toronto infrastructure such as the Don Valley Parkway and the Bloor–Danforth subway line, the coronation of Elizabeth II, and the moon landing – with events from television history such as the founding of CBLT and the publication of the report on the Royal Commission on Broadcasting, which encouraged more competition between the CBC and private broadcasters.



FIGURE 2 Timeline with visitors looking at it. Photo by Rebecca Tisdelle-Macias.
Source: Photo courtesy of Museum of Toronto.

The timeline and the contextual blocks were essential in setting the exhibit's tone and emphasizing the importance of Toronto television history, but the stars of the exhibit were the audiovisual and ephemeral archival materials (and reproductions) themselves. As you would expect from an exhibit about television, the exhibit featured screens throughout each section. The highlight was a wall of televisions, all playing clips from the various *Degrassi* productions (*The Kids of Degrassi Street*, *Degrassi Junior High*, and *Degrassi High*). All these screens and clips provided examples of how important and innovative this programming was by showcasing its uniqueness. For example, the *Degrassi* shows dealt realistically and frankly with issues such as abuse, teen pregnancy, poverty, peer pressure, alcoholism, and bullying. As I watched the clips on the screens, I thought about how, from their costumes to their acting, the age-appropriate actors looked and acted like real kids.

The exhibit featured a wealth of ephemeral material as well. There were several original puppets from TVOntario's shows *Today's Special* and *Bookmice*



FIGURE 3 Wall of TVs showing Degrossi. Photo by Rebecca Tisdelle-Macias.

Source: Photo courtesy of Museum of Toronto.

as well as the Groggs – gangly monster puppets that appeared with the program jockeys (PJs) on the segments that aired between television shows on YTV. Seeing these archival puppets in person brought the television history alive and made it more immediate.

Alongside the television clips and ephemera were important oral history interviews, such as one with journalist, educator, activist, and star of both *Polka Dot Door* and *Today's Special*, Nerene Virgin. Virgin talked about the challenges and triumphs of being one of the first Black women to star in Canadian children's television.

The importance of the audiovisual archival material in the exhibit also brought into focus a massive challenge relating to these ephemeral records: Most of the archival material in the exhibit was from the predominantly crowd-sourced collection of the exhibit's curator, Ed Conroy, and his organization *Retrontario*. *Retrontario* does have a wealth of materials. However, the gaps in the exhibit and the shows that were not represented – such as *Uncle*



FIGURE 4 Today's Special puppets. Photo by Rebecca Tisdelle-Macias.
Source: Photo courtesy of Museum of Toronto.

Bobby, *Readalong*, and *Dear Aunt Agnes* – demonstrate how ephemeral these materials are. Retrontario's website reveals that the absence of these shows was not an intentional snub but the result of Retrontario's inability to locate footage from them and has issued an appeal to the public for donations of any off-air recordings of them they might have.

It is unclear if any archives such as the Archives of Ontario or the CBC Archives were contacted for audiovisual material beyond the Retrontario collection or if copyright issues prevented certain shows from being represented. However, the absences in the exhibit serve as a reminder that not all early television shows have been preserved or are accessible.

With puppets, TV clips, and interactive activities, *Mr. Dressup to Degraffi: 42 Years of Legendary Toronto Kids TV* was foremost a fun experience. The organization of the exhibit – from the contextual information to the prominent place given to audiovisual and ephemeral materials – makes a case for the importance of television history alongside traditional histories and likewise shows how

vitaly important non-paper archival records are in documenting and broadcasting history.