



Muppets in Moscow: The Unexpected Crazy True Story of Making Sesame Street in Russia

Natasha Lance Rogoff

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At the end of the Cold War, a television producer, Natasha Lance Rogoff, took on the challenge of creating *Ulitsa Sezam*, a Russian version of *Sesame Street*. In *Muppets in Moscow*, she chronicles the challenges of that endeavor, from political instability to figuring out how to translate the show for a post-Soviet audience.

The book is fascinating as it details the logistics of navigating the Russian television landscape in 1996. Assassinations were a common industry problem, and the production lost multiple business partners to violence. Bills went unpaid as supporters ran out of money, and the political situation repeatedly threatened to shut the show down before the first episode had filmed. The situation resulted in plenty of intrigue for Rogoff, which is conveyed in an in-the-moment manner.

But some of the book's most fascinating sections also discuss the show's creative process. Rogoff had to get Russian puppeteers and writers to embrace the Muppets despite their initial skepticism, and to help Sesame Workshop develop a trio of Russia-specific puppet characters. Rogoff's team also had to navigate conflicts about topics like diversity, class, and even the notion of encouraging children's optimism about the future. Those discussions and their resolutions are enthralling, and the book captures the methodical but inspired process of building new characters and a show with a Russian sensibility. As a memoir, it also covers Rogoff's personal life at the time: she met a man, got married, and had a baby during the yearslong process of getting the show on the air, forcing her to juggle ever more responsibilities.

While *Ulitsa Sezam* ended in 2007, a generation of Russian children grew up with the fruits of Rogoff's team's labor. *Muppets in Moscow* shows how much work went into the show and how rewarding it was to bring such a popular export to the former USSR.

JEFF FLEISCHER (September / October 2022)

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