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Mr. Dressup: The Magic of Make-Believe

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Abstract

This is a film review of *Mr. Dressup: The Magic of Make-Believe* (2023), directed by Robert McCallum.

Author Notes

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***Mr. Dressup: The Magic of Make-Believe* (2023), dir. Robert McCallum**
Trailer: https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PnXXEh-S_lQ

A word of warning: what follows is highly hagiographical. Ernie Coombs – famous throughout Canada as children's entertainer Mr. Dressup – remains deservedly beloved in his adopted country more than 20 years after his death in 2001. I spent years of my childhood learning from Coombs and his TV show, which ran from 1967 to 1996. I cannot be impartial.

I am not alone. In 2017, *Mr. Dressup* won a national poll conducted by CBC journalist Justin McElroy to determine "Canada's Most Memorable (English) TV Thing."[1] And in 2023, *Mr. Dressup: The Magic of Make-Believe*, the thoughtful documentary about his life and work that had its world premiere at TIFF, arrived to deepen and burnish what seems to be universal affection and acclaim for its subject. The dozens of Canadian celebrities, journalists, and broadcasters featured in the film – including Michael J. Fox, Graham Greene, Eric McCormack, the Barenaked Ladies, and Kids in the Hall – all speak glowingly of Coombs, and how he inspired them to be better artists and people. The screening that I attended was for critics and film industry professionals, a notoriously unsentimental audience. And yet *several times* before the final credits rolled the theatre

filled with the sniffling sounds of people genuinely moved. At the end of the regular TIFF screenings, the audience stood and cheered.[2] I was not surprised when *Mr. Dressup: The Magic of Make-Believe* won the 2023 TIFF People's Choice Documentary Award.

If you do not know Mr. Dressup, you may know a very similar figure: Fred Rogers. In fact, as the film recounts, these two were close friends and collaborators. Rogers was the best man at Coombs' wedding to Marlene Hodgkiss. Later, he was godfather to their two children. They met when Coombs worked with Rogers as a puppeteer, set painter, and occasional performer on a children's show in Pittsburgh. Rogers was hired by the CBC in 1962 to develop a Canadian program that he would eventually turn into *Mr. Rogers Neighborhood* in the US—a crucial bit of television history of which I was not aware—and he invited Coombs to join him. When Rogers returned to Pittsburgh not long after, he encouraged Coombs to stay on in Toronto and take his place in front of the camera. Two years after that, *Mr. Dressup* was born.

Coombs and Rogers shared many admirable traits. Both were gentle, self-effacing, humorous, and playful. They had a wonderful sense of imagination and an intentional, radical kindness. The recent documentaries about the two men showcase all of these qualities but choose different features to highlight, indicated by their titles: *Won't You Be My Neighbor?* (2018) focuses on Rogers' inviting warmth, while *The Magic of Make-Believe* showcases Coombs' creativity. He would draw and do crafts on every episode of *Mr. Dressup*, and most famously would become—and encourage children to become—just about anyone or anything, sometimes using costumes but often with simple props and a few scraps of clothing. The simplicity of the costumes was part of the point, just as he would use common household objects for his crafts. This approach, as people in the film repeatedly testify, helped children feel that they could do what they saw Mr. Dressup do. We also see Coombs referencing one of his most well-known tools in a graduation speech he

gave at Trent University in 2001, rhetorically asking: “What wisdom have I acquired during 30 years of making various objects out of toilet paper rolls?”

Coombs’ use of everyday items was not only practical and inclusive. It also spoke to his belief that there is wonder and magic all around us, all the time. Several commentators remark on their excitement as he would begin to make a craft, or create a costume, or begin a drawing. Often they had no idea what it was going to be when he started, and enthusiastically speculated as Mr. Dressup snipped, scribbled, and glued—Is it a mask? A pirate? A *dinosaur*?—until things took enough shape that the truth became clear. The other similar source of excitement was the iconic Tickle Trunk that Coombs would open every episode, pulling out items to effect his surprising transformations.

All of this was accomplished at a very deliberate pace. Coombs took his time, always. The point was not just for kids to watch him, but to play along *with* him. There was concern when Sesame Street arrived in 1969 with a much faster and more entertainment-focused style. Ratings for *Mr. Dressup* took a hit. But Coombs refused to follow the new trend. He was doing his own thing, and had faith that this thing was meaningful. His ratings soon recovered. People felt like he was spending time with them; they felt like he cared about them. They remember that the show was calming. One says they found it a “haven.”

These ways of connecting with children included a groundbreaking level of inclusivity. A simple but incredibly powerful example of this inclusivity is the puppet Casey, Coombs’ main conversation partner on the show from its inception until 1989. (Casey is on the left in the image at the top of this review, with Finnegan the dog and Mr. Dressup.) Casey was a child whose gender was never revealed or discussed, meant as a kind of stand-in for the show’s audience. The puppeteer behind Casey, Judith Lawrence, recalls in the film: “When children would ask me if

Casey was a boy or a girl, I would say 'Yes.'" They wanted all kids to be able to identify with Casey. Reflecting on this aspect of the show, Beverly Glenn-Copeland—a Black trans actor who performed with Coombs for 25 years—declares that *Mr. Dressup* was "waaay ahead of its time. Not a little bit. Way ahead."

But Coombs was of course also a human being who needed to learn and grow himself. Despite his commitment to gender equality, for instance, we hear that early on he still held stereotypical perspectives. He took it for granted that domestic tasks like sewing were for women and that men were needed for more mechanical work, like plumbing. Collaborators such as Judith Lawrence quickly explained to him why he was wrong. And he listened. This may be, in part, what Coombs means when he says in the film, "having been Mr. Dressup for 20 years has probably made me a better person."

The documentary makes no overt mention of religion. The closest it comes involves the ideas from its title of "magic" and "make-believe," and the way in which Coombs' was clearly inspirational to so many people. The lack of explicit references to religion in the film speaks to a key *difference* between Coombs and Fred Rogers. Rogers was devoutly Christian, and in fact became a Presbyterian minister. Instead of serving a church, however, he decided to go into television—seeing it as a possible tool he could use to evangelize kindness. If Coombs was affiliated with any particular religious tradition, on the other hand, he kept this well-hidden. I've looked through well over a hundred essays, news reports, and biographical pieces on him and found no mention of this at all.

What the film does show us is that Coombs worked for decades to encourage questions, curiosity, and confidence in all children. He wanted them to explore. He wanted them to feel that they mattered, that they were creative, that anything they could imagine might be possible. He

wanted them to know they could be whatever and whoever they wanted. Coombs' "religion," as it were, was his understanding that the world is filled with wonders, and that everyone should be able to share in this wonder equally.

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[1] Justin McElroy, "Canada's Most Memorable (English) TV Thing: Final Round." *Justin McElroy*. November 24, 2017. Accessed January 7, 2024. https://justinmcelroy.com/2017/11/24/canadas-most-memorable-english-tv-thing-the-final.

[2] Debra Yeo, "'Mr. Dressup is a language, it's not just a show' — how Canada fell in love with Ernie Coombs." *The Toronto Star*. October 10, 2023. Accessed January 10, 2024. https://www.thestar.com/entertainment/television/mr-dressup-is-a-language-it-s-not-just-a-show-how-canada-fell-in/article_45e9f337-ab7c-57b3-80e4-d1182f7955a0.html.