

Curious George goes to Moscow via UCSD satellite link

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By LEIGH ENGEL

"Are you there, Michael? This is Moscow calling San Diego."

Squatting on the floor of Mandeville Recital Hall in front of about 150 parents, children and educators, Michael Cole relaxed, grinning in excited triumph. The satellite link had worked — he was talking live with Moscow. After more than a month of frustration, technical troubles and bureaucratic complications, the UCSD professor of communications was bringing Curious George to Moscow.

"Children and Film," a simultaneous satellite videocast between UCSD and the 13th International Film Festival in Moscow, began at 10:35 a.m. on July 20. It was the first international videocast used for educational purposes and, according to Helene Keyssar, chairman of the UCSD department of communications, proof that the power of modern technology can be used to increase international understanding.

For the children and filmmakers involved, the broadcast was an opportunity to share ideas, discuss lifestyles and enjoy a few good movies into the bargain. The script, carefully timed and written by Cole and Russian journalist Vladimir Pozner, allowed for a few minutes of introduction, followed by three children's film segments from each side and a period for reaction and discussion between both audiences.

About 40 children between the ages of 4 and 17 knelt on pillows, fidgeting before the large-screen television which would soon connect them with their Soviet

counterparts. There were students from the Learning Tree and UCSD Computer Camp, as well as children of University staff and faculty and participants in other San Diego summer programs.

Sitting cross-legged among the children, filmmakers Shelley Duvall, John Matthews and Robert Radnitz, and Director of the American Center of Films for Children Shanta Herzog waited expectantly. A moment of silence, and then Pozner's voice sounded in the recital hall. Everyone broke into cheers as Cole saluted his friend in Russian. The program which had been dreamed up in a Russian apartment weeks before was finally underway.

"It started in June when I was in Moscow to participate in a seminar," said Cole. "On the last night I was visiting my friend Vladimir Posner in his apartment. Joseph Golden, who is also involved in the film industry and in new forms of communications, was there, too, and we were discussing the previous broadcast of the May US Festival."

Cole and his friends wanted to use the simultaneous videocast technique as a tool for providing information about the world both to the Americans and the Soviets. The 13th International Moscow Film Festival was scheduled to begin on July 7 and the idea of using children's films as the telecast theme seemed natural.

"Children's films are a big part of the festival," said Cole, "and children are an especially obvious symbol of common concern. By the naivete of their questions they

reveal issues that adults might be afraid to touch. They can help adults to communicate."

Cole flew back to the United States the next day to investigate the possibility of a satellite hook-up and begin lining up filmmak-

ers for the show. Complications began almost immediately.

"The problems in communication were terrible," he said. "In order to make a phone call to the Soviet Union you have to make a reservation with the international

operator at least a week in advance. If they send you a telegram, it might take four or five days to get here. Everything had to be done very quickly so we could get it all together by the last day of the festival."

Funding was one of the first problems encountered on the American side. The project cost about \$20,000, and Cole and his assistants applied to and received money from the Carnegie Foundation, the Lounsbery Foundation, the Price Foundation, the Foundation for Child Development and the Communication Department at UCSD.

Next, Cole had to arrange a time for the videocast with Bonville Satellite in San Diego. "This was where the communications problem was really killing our side," he said. "The satellite people wouldn't confirm until we had both the exact origin and destination points and we couldn't get in touch with their side to see just where the destination point would be."

Meanwhile, preparations on the Soviet side were encountering a slightly different set of obstacles. Pozner and Golden couldn't get official permission until the Friday before the videocast was scheduled to take place.

"There's competition between the film and the television industries there just like there is here," said Cole. "This was something that was proposed by film and done by TV so naturally there were a lot of bureaucratic complications."

In a phone call to Pozner the Saturday before the telecast, Cole was finally able to confirm the Moscow site. Monday, July 18, he called the satellite company to reserve the links between San Diego and Moscow. "At that point I thought we were all clear," he said.

On Tuesday morning, July 19, Bonneville Satellite called Cole to tell him that the link going from San Diego to Moscow had been reserved but the link going from Moscow to San Diego was being used by someone else. It was

already evening in Moscow, as Cole tried frantically to make alternative arrangements. With great difficulty and a little help from the House Subcommittee on Telecommunications, he put through three phone calls to Moscow that day. "We were lucky to convince the operators that we weren't just troublemakers trying to tie up the lines," said Cole. "We had to persuade them that this was an urgent situation and we weren't just trying to use up the time that other people had reserved a week ago."

Finally, Cole and his associates arranged for an alternate satellite link going through Germany. The link cost \$5,000 more and provided five minutes less broadcast time. On Wednesday, July 20, an hour before the show, Cole was

still trying to place a call to Pozner in order to discuss cutting five minutes out of the script and to make last minute arrangements. This time he wasn't so lucky.

In Mandeville Recital Hall, folk singer Sam Hinton had just finished warming up the audience with a few choruses of "So Long It's Been Good to Know You." Helene Keyssar ran through the schedule, as far as they knew it, with the audience. The television cameras pointed at the monitors. Outside in a truck, one of Cole's associates was still trying to put through the call.

"We were obviously going to have to ad lib it," said Cole. "I was really nervous about it. Then I saw Vladimir on the screen and when he started talking someone on that side told him the call had

finally come through. Of course, by that time it was too late. I'll have to play back the tape to hear if Vladimir actually cursed the guy."

A sense of unreality seemed to settle over the audience as the Moscow cameras panned across a vista of young faces, many smiling above the Young Pioneer kerchief, a symbol worn by children in recognition of the Communist Party. Scenes from the Moscow film festival flickered across the screen, and for a few moments it looked like just another travel film.

Then the picture returned to the studios. Pozner introduced a few of the Russian children and Cole returned the courtesy, receiving loud cheers each time he mentioned one of the schools.

"By the end of all that introductory material we were almost seven minutes behind schedule," said Cole. "I was afraid we were going to have to cut one of the films. We obviously couldn't cut out Shelley Duvall's piece because of the star system and I figured I'd be an S.O.B. if I sacrificed one of the others. What it came down to was coupling the films and eliminating some of the discussion."

Any shyness between the two groups dissolved as the technicians began showing the film clips. The program began with Vladimir Grammatika's "The Kindergarten Teacher with a Moustache," about a group of students who computerize a skeleton so that it comes to life in front of their anatomy teacher. As the skeleton cavorted around the classroom, both audiences laughed and clapped their hands in time to the music.

"At first you saw the Russian kids looking very formal and doing a kind of speech presentation while our kids were lounging around on the pillows," said Cole. "But after they started watching

the films you couldn't tell the difference between the two groups."

The other Soviet film segments shown were a piece by Alexander Merta entitled "Film, Film, Film" and a version of "Winnie the Pooh" by Fyodr Khitrak.

Representing the Americanside were John Matthews' "George Goes to the Circus!" and clips from Robert Radnitz's "Sounder" and "Stepping Beauty" from Shelley Duvall's Fairie Tale Theater.

The children invited to view the movies expressed some surprise over both the films and the children they conversed with by means of translators in both audiences.

"They were so different than we were, more outgoing," said Cecile Nierodzinski, a fifth grader at Jamul Lassiter Elementary School. "It was strange because they used only two characters in the "Winnie the Pooh" film and we have a lot here. I think things must be very different in Russia."

"I thought most of the Russian films were pretty exciting," said Marc Laitin, a fourth grader at Torrey Pines Elementary School. "I guess I didn't expect the Rus-

sians to be any different and they were a little."

The filmmakers also showed enthusiasm about the project as they signed autographs and ducked the handfuls of confetti after the program. "It was really magical to see all those Russians live and realizing that they're just normal, living, feeling people," said Matthews. "They're not at all threatening but rather delightful really."

Duvall said she applauded the use of children's films as a medium of universal appeal. "Fairy tales in particular are popular all over the world," she said. "Every country that I went to while I was on tour with 'Popeye' I got the same reaction. When I told them what I was doing here with Fairie Tale Theater they would stand up and applaud."

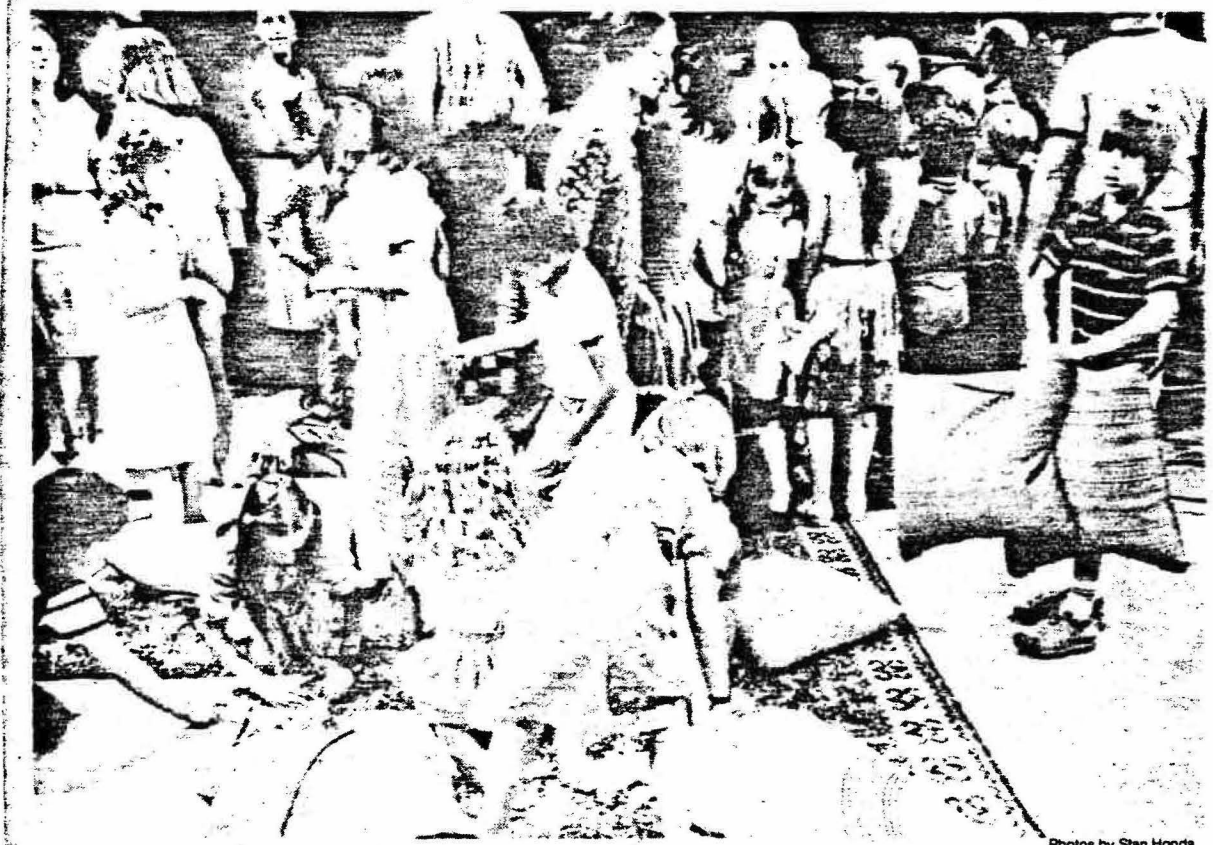
"I think they all responded very well," she said. "You could tell just by looking at their eyes. And the little girls on both sides got all dreamy when the prince was about to kiss Sleeping Beauty. I think it's the beginning of better communication between the people of the United States and the Soviet Union."



Shelley Duvall



John Matthews



Photos by Stan Honda

The excitement continues at Mandeville Recital Hall as children from all over the San Diego area

share impressions and toss confetti following the live Moscow videocast.