

The New York Times

Shari Lewis, TV Puppeteer Loved by Children, Dies at 65

By Richard Severo

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Shari Lewis, who used her estimable skills as a ventriloquist and puppeteer to win 12 Emmy Awards and the hearts of parents and their children for four decades with a woolly hand puppet named Lamb Chop, died on Sunday at Cedars Sinai Medical Center in Los Angeles. She was 65 and lived in Beverly Hills, Calif.

The cause was complications from uterine cancer, which was diagnosed in June. Ms. Lewis had been undergoing chemotherapy for six weeks, said her spokeswoman, Maggie Begley. She was thought to be doing well but then developed pneumonia, she said.

Ms. Lewis's illness caused her to cut short her production in Vancouver of the latest television series she was creating for PBS, "The Charlie Horse Music Pizza." The series began last January and has been a mainstay of PBS programming for children. A spokesman for PBS said yesterday that three remaining episodes will be broadcast in the fall.

This year marked Ms. Lewis's 50th anniversary as a performer. Her career started in 1948 when she appeared in a local NBC show in New York and pulled a rabbit out of a hat (her father had taught her the trick only the day before). Her last PBS series before "The Charlie Horse Music Pizza" was "Lamb Chop's Play-Along," which ran from 1989 to 1995. The show won five Emmys in five years as well as a New York International Film Festival Gold Award and many other prizes. She also created holiday specials, including "Lamb Chop's Special Hanukkah," on PBS in 1995, and "Shari's Passover Surprise," with Dom DeLuise as a guest.

Earlier this year, Ms. Lewis said she got the idea for "The Charlie Horse Music Pizza" during a conversation with her husband, the publisher Jeremy Tarcher, in which they decided that what children liked most was music, pizza and the beach. The show features Mr. DeLuise as a cook and Chancz Perry as an orangutan who delivers pizza by skateboard.

Ms. Lewis was acknowledged to have all the instincts of a multifaceted entertainer. Although she was never a schoolteacher, she knew how to reach children with her puppet sidekicks, chief among them being Lamb Chop, an ageless curly-haired creature who would interrupt Ms. Lewis with all manner of observations and questions. Lamb Chop was arguably her most beloved puppet, but in the eyes of children who watched her shows, Charlie Horse and Hush Puppy weren't far behind.

"I'm a role model," she said. "It's really very funny because I never play teacher. I never play parent. I play older playmate." She did this most convincingly even in her 60's.

She was a playmate who loved good music and throughout her career she invented ways to encourage children to love it as she did. And so, when she created "Lamb Chop Loves Music," Ms. Lewis played the piano in the show, which led Lamb Chop to insist that she wanted to learn to play too. Ms. Lewis then told Lamb Chop that her desire to learn piano wasn't enough, that she had to do much more. Lamb Chop had to learn all the instruments, Ms. Lewis said. Lamb Chop agreed, whereupon a collection of instruments came to life to provide a lesson about woodwinds, strings, brass and percussion.

Ms. Lewis felt that "musical training teaches something that is seldom learned in any other manner: namely, that if you stick to what you are trying to do, you will, eventually, 'get it.' " She was convinced that the study of a musical instrument builds neurological connections and better study habits.

She did not limit herself to using her sock puppets to persuade children that they ought to learn an instrument. She took to the podium and conducted symphony orchestras in the United States, Canada and Japan, offering music she thought children would like, especially the sounds of Beethoven, Bizet, Mozart and Stravinsky.

She wrote 60 books for children, including "Magic For Nonmagicians," "Things That Kids Collect," "One-Minute Bedtime Stories," "One-Minute Favorite Fairy Tales" and "One-Minute Greek Myths." She also made many recordings, filmstrips and videos for children.

Shari Lewis was born on Jan. 17, 1934, in New York City. Her spokeswoman and family members said she was 65, although the birth date listed in reference books would have made her 64.

She was the daughter of Abraham B. Hurwitz, a college professor who doubled as a magician, and Ann Hurwitz, a music coordinator for the New York City Board of Education and an accomplished pianist. Her mother was an energetic woman who began teaching her daughter piano at the age of 2. But Ms. Lewis said often that she was not a natural pianist and that her passion for music began the day she tucked a violin under her chin.

She studied music theory and orchestration, as well as piano and violin at the High School of Music and Art; dance at the School of American Ballet, and acting with Sanford Meisner at the Neighborhood Playhouse. She even found time to take baton-twirling lessons.

She seemed to learn ventriloquism on her own. When she was a girl, her father thought he heard a voice coming out of a closet in the Hurwitz's apartment. When he discovered that his daughter had been able to throw her voice there, he found a former vaudevillian to coach her.

She attended Columbia University and in the 1950's was married briefly to Stan Lewis. She married Mr. Tarcher in 1958. He survives her, along with their daughter, Mallory. Both her husband and daughter collaborated with her in her projects.

Ms. Lewis did not initially gravitate to puppeteering. Her skills in acting and dancing earned her roles in touring company and summer stock productions of "Damn Yankees," "Bye, Bye, Birdie" and "Funny Girl." She also performed in nightclubs and casinos and did dramatic roles in television.

Her first big break in show business came in 1952 when she appeared on Arthur Godfrey's televised "Talent Scout" show. In 1957 she introduced Lamb Chop on "Captain Kangaroo," which led to her own morning television program for NBC, "The Shari Show." Ms. Lewis's puppets were a staple on NBC from 1957 to 1963.

From 1968 to 1976, she was in London, doing her own television series on BBC-1 every Sunday night, as well as specials that were seen in Canada and Australia.

Ms. Lewis returned to children's television in the United States with "Lamb Chop's Play-Along." She said her work kept her young: "If you follow your heart, your heart sings and you just dance to that music."

Peggy Charren, a longtime champion of better television programming for children and a close friend of Ms. Lewis's, recalled yesterday what it was like when Ms. Lewis, accompanied by Lamb Chop, showed up in Washington in 1993 to appear before the House Telecommunications Subcommittee, which was holding hearings on how to strengthen the provisions of the Children's Television Act of 1990.

Ms. Lewis vehemently defended the need to strengthen such protection and then informed Representative Edward Markey, a Democrat from Massachusetts and chairman of the subcommittee, that Lamb Chop wanted to testify, too. Mr. Markey readily agreed.

Lamb Chop turned to Ms. Lewis and said, "O.K., you can go now."

"If I go, you don't talk," Ms. Lewis replied.

So Ms. Lewis remained and Lamb Chop, who always rose to the occasion, gave an impassioned speech about the need for Government to care about children and children's television and to protect young viewers from junk. "It was one of those things that nobody who was there will ever forget," Ms. Charren said.

In Washington yesterday, Ms. Lewis's accomplishments as an educator were praised by Richard W. Riley, the Secretary of Education.

"By combining humor with teaching and entertainment," he said, "Shari taught us we can laugh and learn at the same time."

Correction: Aug. 8, 1998

An obituary on Tuesday about the ventriloquist and puppeteer Shari Lewis misstated the name of her first show for NBC television, in 1957. It was "Shariland," not "The Shari Show." From 1960 to 1963, her program was called "The Shari Lewis Show." "The Shari Show," a syndicated program, began in 1975.

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