

SHELLEY DUVAL

Portrait of a Multimedia Pioneer

Ted F. Gerdes

"Multimedia was a promise," recalls writer, actress, producer and entertainment executive Shelley Duval. "I wanted to be on the cutting edge. I was fascinated by the combination of art and technology."

Multimedia is the latest buzzword in Hollywood. Many are talking about it but few are actually working on multimedia projects. Duvall is an exception to the hype; she is a multimedia pioneer. Her children's story, *It's a Bird's Life*, was released at the Mac World Expo in January 1993, long before most people knew what interactive multimedia was; even before Al Gore and others began staking claims to the information superhighway. It was the first product ported to the new 3DO platform.

It's a Bird's Life is an original story written and narrated by Duvall. The story follows a group of zany parrots on an odyssey from Los Angeles to the Amazon forest and back again. Along the journey, a child can read along with a word-for-word synched narration; look up more than 400 words in a customized dictionary, learn fascinating details on the clouds, the Amazon rain forest and birds; sing along with 11 original songs and use the activities section, which includes a coloring book, connect-the-dots puzzles, object search and a shell game.

"*It's a Bird's Life* is really much more," Duvall says. "It's about growing up and learning how to survive. It's an intermediary tool to introduce kids to the new medium of interactive multimedia. Video games provided them with the step between school books and the television set, and computer games gave them familiarity with the technology that will bring them education." Duvall sees the interactive compact disc as an additional and more sophisticated link between technology and education.

Duvall is enthusiastic about the possibilities this medium has for children and for education: "It allows children to learn at their own pace. They can access the material at their own speed. If you want to learn a lot, you can. If you want to just play and explore, you can do that as well." The key is to be able to engage the user, Duvall says. "If you can interest someone in something, they will thrive."

Through fact, fiction, games, text, audio and video, including the ability to instantaneously interact with the program, children have the opportunity to learn on their own, Duvall explains. "They learn much faster with a combination of audio and video."

Duvall is no stranger to the art of creating captivating programming for children. Her popular and award-winning television programs include *Faerie Tale Theatre*, *Tall Tales and Legends*, and *Mother Goose Rock 'N' Rhyme*. She doesn't take the task of creating children's programming lightly. One of the keys to her success with children is that she treats them with respect and "doesn't condescend" to them. "You must be completely honest with children," she says, because they are more likely to "notice things" than most adults give them credit for.

Also paramount to her success is her ability to make the programs fun, interesting and, above all, entertaining. Duvall's reputation for quality and her powers of persuasion have aided her in attracting some of Hollywood's finest talent to work on her productions: Mick Jagger, Robin Williams, Vanessa Redgrave, Billy Crystal, Tim Burton, Liza Minnelli, Gregory Hines, Francis Coppola, Mary Steenburgen and Jules Feiffer, to name a few.

It is easy to see why Duvall has won a multitude of awards for her programming efforts, including the first Golden ACE award, the prestigious George Foster Peabody Award and no less than seven ACE awards for cable excellence.

Duvall also is no stranger to law or lawyers. Her father, Robert Duvall, is a lawyer still practicing in Palestine, Texas. She remembers reading his law books at an early age. His office, with its huge red leather chair and walls of "good smelling" books, fascinated her. Her love of books continues and she now maintains a large collection of children's books.

Her fascination with law has become part of her job description as chairman and chief executive of Think Entertainment. She uses her attorneys as a preventative tool "to keep me out of problem areas" she says. In Duvall's opinion, the development of interactive multimedia means a difficult time for lawyers as their task is "defining what the rules are and setting the standards." To her, the most difficult - and most important - legal task is to "retain ownership of your material to allow you to exploit it in other markets, cross-promote it in other media." For example, she is still interested in making a film version of *It's a Bird's Life*, which originally was conceived as a feature film.

Duvall's next interactive multimedia title, *It's a Dog's Life*, currently is in production. It is the second in a planned series of *It's a...Life* presentations. "*It's a Dog's Life* shows kids how to use the talents they have," Duvall says. "The kids have to help the dog use the talents it has" and in doing so, they learn to utilize their own talents. "These concepts are too difficult to explain to kids," she adds, "but they can pick them up by way of example."

As an actress, Duvall recently appeared in an episode of *L.A. Law* and has a part in a Steven Soderberg suspense thriller entitled *The Underneath*, now being filmed in Texas. As a producer, she just finished her latest children's programming effort, *Mrs. Piggle-Wiggle*, based on the books by Betty MacDonald. The series is Duvall's fifth for the Showtime cable channel. It stars Jean Stapleton as an eccentric woman who lives in an upside-down house and gives uncommon cures for common problems. Guest stars include Ed Begly Jr., Joan Cusak and Christopher Lloyd. Duvall appears in it as well.