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A Big Pile of Sweet-Minded Silliness for All

Media Reviews for Media People: 'Yo Gabba Gabba!'

By Larry Dobrow
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On Tuesday, I accompanied my nephew to an assembly in which a guest speaker attempted to explain the concepts of "responsibility" and "potential" to twitchy first- and second-graders. This didn't go over well, owing both to the subject matter and the speaker's poor decision not to incorporate cutesy-wutesy critters into his shtick (I was later informed that Muddy Puddles, the aromatic first-grade hamster, had recently met an unfortunate end at the hands of a space heater). The guy's act almost devolved into farce when, as he pulled the old "magic coloring book" trick out of hibernation, his "special helper" tried to yank away the rigged prop. It took a crate of juice boxes to restore order.



In the wake of this, I'm proposing that we hand over the education of our children to the TV set. It can't do much worse. When Li'l Larry comes along, I'm going to wash my hands of everything but tending to his most basic needs (bottle procurement, de-soiling) and simply plop him in front of Nickelodeon. Specifically, I'll see to it that the lad receives a generous heaping of whimsy courtesy of "Yo Gabba Gabba!," one of the most imaginative offerings in the history of the genre.

Colorful universe

"Yo Gabba Gabba!," which airs on both Nickelodeon and Noggin, creates a universe in which kids, furry monsters and hip-hop DJs happily coexist (you know, kind of like Williamsburg). Alternating between alt-rock-tinged ditties and trippy animated sequences, the show is a big pile of sweet-minded silliness. Picture a polychromatic mash-up between "The Electric Company," "H.R. Pufnstuf" and the new Ting Tings record, and you're on the right track.

What distinguishes "Yo Gabba Gabba!" from just about every other children's offering is the way it goes about conveying its go-you! messages. The show doesn't come out and announce, "Today we're going to talk about self-respect, which will come in handy upon the reception of your first booty call." Rather, it devotes entire episodes to a single off-kilter topic -- we're currently in the middle of "unique week," with robot-, teeth- and weather-themed shows -- and subtly weaves lessons about tolerance and generosity into them.

Me, I dig "Yo Gabba Gabba!" for the same reasons that young kids without fully developed cognitive functions might: Bright colors! Funny songs! Wheeeee! Most actual adults, however, won't find sitting through the show anywhere near as stultifying as they might "Bob the Builder," owing to the sly nods to pop culture.

Devo's Mark Mothersbaugh concocts "robot gorillas." Biz Markie shares the beat-boxing secrets that will give our children a leg up on their contemporaries from Asia. Amare Stoudemire, Melora Hardin, Elijah Wood, Laila Ali and Tony Hawk drop in to ... well, just act daffy and amplify the absurdist vibe.

Ear candy

And then there are the insanely catchy ditties, complete with appearances from indie-world titans (The Shins, Shiny Toy Guns, Mates of State) and

mainstreamers (Sugarland, Sean Kingston, Mya) alike. I have been warbling one of the refrains from yesterday's episode -- "I can solve problems and solve difficult tasks/But I need someone to program meeeee" -- nonstop for the last 18 hours. If you give me four dollars, I promise never to show up at your house or place of employment.

Since "Yo Gabba Gabba!" runs for 22 uninterrupted minutes, marketers can't intrude on the retro-groovy action. It's worth noting, though, the variety of ads that pop up before and after the show. Amid the expected spots for Barbie's new dream house (now with arboretum!), a Dora the Explorer flick soon to air on Nickelodeon ("Diego and Dora's Infinite Multilingual Playlist") and the insidiously creepy Water Babies (when you fill them with warm water, they "feel so real"), there are a handful of ads that target parents. The Dixie plates, Pampers and newly Morgan-Fairchild-free Old Navy spots stand out in

a good way among all the Cabbage Patch Kids and "Swim to Me Puppy."

Is it possible that the real story here isn't "Yo Gabba Gabba!" as much as Nickelodeon's ability to maintain consistency in its branding? This can't be easy when you've got 24 hours per day to fill. Even with a handful of competitors elbowing in on its action, Nickelodeon still means "kids," just as The Weather Channel means "El Niño fetishists" and CBS means "retirees who can't comprehend serialized dramas." I wish other networks were one-tenth as creative as Nickelodeon again proves itself to be with its championing of shows like "Yo Gabba Gabba!"

Anyway, I love "Yo Gabba Gabba!" and so will kids, stoners and anyone else in touch with his inner goofball. If you're somehow immune to its charms, I feel bad for you. ■