

PUNCH, MY HERO



This is the story of my involvement with Mr Punch, hero and monster, from around 1963-1975 and beyond. That is, from 40-50 years ago, so I am digging up some old memories here which, as we all find out, gets more difficult with age. Some of the details are a bit fuzzy. I did not have a camera so the photographic record is patchy.

Punch and Judy is of course a venerable British seaside tradition. These are glove puppets played in a tall canvas booth to crowds of screaming children and frequently laughing parents for pennies on the promenades and parks. The character of Punch is both funny and reprehensible, which ensures his undying (literally) persistence. British children grow up within this tradition and it endures. More or less.

Background

I was an apprentice to Michael Byrom, performer of Punch and historian of the play, from 1963-66 on the promenades of Worthing and Brighton on the south coast of England. Byrom was my mentor. He was an artist and philosopher as well as a Punch Professor and was a considerable influence to me in my formative years. You might have thought that he was gay, but that was not the case - I didn't even know what "gay" meant. I had a girlfriend and was a chemistry undergraduate in Scotland. Byrom was a classic "outsider" and I had a student-teacher relationship with him which I grew out of in the natural progression of mentorships.

Byrom had bought and refurbished a set of old Punch and Judy puppets from a retiring showman around 1963 and I was invited to be the bottler (assistant) for the summer of 1964. I hitch-hiked down from Scotland (13+ hours, not bad) and found a cheap apartment in the area for 2 months at £5 a week. This was reprised in the next two years in Brighton. Here I am on Brighton pier in 1965, looking somewhat bohemian, slim and poor. Pennies per show did not go very far.



Basil's Show



Basil, Worthing 1964. All seats 6d.

Byrom performed under the name of Basil. Attached is his play bill. He also did a bit of magic as a preliminary setting to the show when it was indoors at parties. Along with me, he hired an old showman Bert who helped as well.



With Bert, Worthing 1964

The promenade at Brighton by the main Palace pier was a favorite spot, with a corner of the pavement by the stairs particularly suitable.



Brighton by the stairs, 1965-70



The Bottler catches the poor baby.

Byrom was a traditionalist. What attracted him to the show was its black humor and irresponsibility. He lamented the modern trend of “pulling its teeth” which played up the slap-stick and clown business

at the expense of the satire. He put on a strong show with the hanging scene and all. The kids were wild about it.

In the slow months, he began researching the origins of the show, which he posited as essentially Italian derived from the Commedia dell' arte, transmuted into the English version after its introduction by Italian puppet men in the early 1800s (Piccini). Sick humor is continental, not British (which favors puns). The result of this research was a book, PUNCH AND JUDY, ITS ORIGIN AND EVOLUTION (1972).

I helped him with his research, particularly in visiting other P&J Professors in England e.g. Stan Quigley, Joe Beeby, Ken Robertson, Percy Press, and Jack Armitage. We transcribed their shows as best we could, a slice of history.

After 1966 when I had graduated (as a chemistry major heading to teaching), I could not do the summer stints, but Basil kept performing. I believe he eventually moved down to the Torquay area.



1972?

Smith's Contribution

I had developed a keen appreciation for the art and made some early attempts at creating my own puppets. I worked oak wood blocks but since I had no money or tools, this was a bit of a struggle. Then I turned to fiberglass and resin (chemistry is useful) and with plasticine, plaster molds and a lot of fussing got some useful heads. I bought some spares from Byrom and soon had a working set, but no booth or venue.



Smith's set, 1967

In late 1967 I left Scotland to travel abroad and put the puppets in storage. Aberdeen, my home town, has awful weather anyway which was not propitious for beach performances.

Fast forward to 1971 when I returned to Aberdeen for post-graduate work in chemistry and got out the puppets. Under the prodding of a girl-friend, I built up a complete show. I designed and ordered tubing for the booth and my mother sewed up the bright striped canvas cover. Of course, I knew the show by heart after my seasons on the beach, so I put on a few preliminary shows on street corners in Aberdeen.



Every little bit helps! Early show in Aberdeen.

I eventually built up a local reputation and was doing about a show a week for church fetes, birthday parties, and even highland games. In schools the kids screamed with delight, the teachers not so much; I was not invited back. In 1974 the Aberdeen park department paid me to go around to the parks for 6 shows, one a week, rain or shine. This was physically hard work. Putting on a show is like playing a round or two of tennis. I also performed some preliminary visual magic tricks for 10 mins. I like to say I paid my way through graduate school doing Punch and Judy.



Pre-show magic, Aberdeen Town Hall, 1972

There is one good story for the record. After one great show for a student's 21st birthday party, when everyone was well lubricated (students are old enough to appreciate the humor, young enough to enjoy the spectacle), a visiting American girl approached and was greatly intrigued by the hand-made puppets and kit. We got talking; and the rest is history. Two months later when she finally saw a show, the violence and wickedness of it all horrified her; but by then it was too late. My wife has never since taken to Punch.

Publishing

In 1971 on my return to Aberdeen, I had saved some money after a few years teaching in foreign lands, so working with Byrom we published PUNCH AND JUDY ITS ORIGIN AND EVOLUTION in 1972, using a local press in Aberdeen. I sold the book from my bed-sit. It was not a runaway hit. A few years later Byrom republished it as a different imprint. I hear the book is well appreciated in the P&J Community for its diligent research.

In the USA

We moved to the USA in 1978 and continued to put on shows, but with less resonances. But that is another story for different article.



Wisconsin, 1989

Here is my son Leven, aged 4, getting into it:



A few years ago, I was back in the UK in the village where my brother lives. I had brought my puppets and a simple proscenium, and I put on a show for the village kids. It was terrific as expected; like a warm bath to be back in the right milieu.



Resources

See www.sandsmith.com for a script, articles, and videos of my shows (the most complete being the Plattsburg video of 2005). Facebook has a Punch and Judy Fellowship page to follow, and the fellowship based in the UK, maintains www.ThePJF.com and keeps abreast of the P&J world in the UK, which is still vigorous. The site has many links to current literature and performers.

Peter M. Smith
Dec. 2016

Basil's Play Bill



BASIL'S PUNCH & JUDY

30 minutes of the wit and devilment of the immortal Mr. Punch

Ideal for children's Christmas and Birthday Parties

1965-9 Five Years on Brighton's Sea Front

Special Performances at :

The Metropole - The Bedford - The Dudley - and other Hotels
and numerous private engagements - Halls - Cafes - Schools - Fairs - Camps

Reduced Rate in your own home

Shorter Production for Infants

The Stage, nearly 8 feet high, is electrically lit indoors

The Show can be combined with a program of MAGIC for a longer entertainment

Dr. Smith's

PUNCH AND JUDY SHOW



Mr. Punch entertains with mischief, mayhem, and murder.

The wicked Mr. Punch cannot take anything seriously.

Cheer him on as he wreaks havoc among family and foes.

This is the traditional uncensored British show suitable for
anyone over 5.

It's shocking!

It's terrible!

It should be banned!

Long live Mr. Punch!

MISCELLANY

Cookery



Pete Smith with some of his dolls.

Student revives the immortal Mr Punch

IN ABERDEEN, a research student recently built a Punch and Judy theatre and this great seaside tradition has been revived with a new vigour. Pete Smith, of 66 Polmuir Road, Aberdeen, recreated the "immortal Mr Punch" in splendid yellow and red velvet with wicked smile and squeaky voice, to entertain us once again with his devilment and fun.

Pete became fascinated by Punch and Judy through Mr Michael Byrom, a professional Punch and Judy man on the South coast of England, who is an historian of the drama and whose book tracing the development of the play from the mystery plays of the Middle Ages to the present is soon to be published. By helping Mr Byrom during the summer months, Pete learned all the tricks.

"I was initiated into the art-form by this 'professor' so that when I came to make my own show I knew exactly what was wanted," he explained. "I had made the wooden dolls a few years ago—and there are about 16 characters in the full show—but I never used them because I wanted to travel.

"Now that I've settled for a while, I decided with another friend to build the theatre, and we were very busy before Christmas. Since then we've done quite a few shows for all types of audience and Punch has captivated them all!"

The show is certainly very attractive with its yellow and red striped canvas booth (which collapses for easy transport), the picturesque stage and striking, colourful characters. The children loved the crocodile

most with its snapping jaws and appetite for sausages. While his assistant looks after the audience outside Pete manipulates the gloves himself.

"It's very strenuous, but great fun, especially when the kids shout back at Punch. They think he's real and they love him for his misbehaviour. The show is violent but Punch is never excused for his violence. Even when he gets off with murder he is so alive and witty we have to admire him. At the climax of the drama he jokes with the hangman and then tricks him.

"Modern Punchmen tend to play down this aspect of violence, but I think that to do this robs the play of its strength and satire, and this is one of the main reasons it is dying out. It doesn't mean anything if it is only songs and slap-stick."

Pete prefers the old versions of the play and bases his own show on an original Italian script—indeed this is not just for children, for much of the humour can be appreciated only by adults. Yet it is the kids who will always be enthralled by the magic of puppets and Pete, wearing his top-hat and striped waistcoat, often does some conjuring tricks to set the scene for them.

Now that he has his show going so successfully, Pete hopes to be able to do a lot more work with it and he has many ideas for the future. "Punch should be down on the beach entertaining large summer crowds. I'll have to look around for a suitable pitch," he says. The tradition lives on! P. S.