

PUNCH IN THE MODERN USA

By Peter M. Smith

As a practicing professor in the UK, I was excited to start performing in the USA when I was transplanted here in the late 1970s. My kit arrived and I quickly put on some shows for my neighbors (as we spell it over here) and friends. As usual, Punch was a big hit. But to my surprise and bemusement, I was not asked for any return business. Since I was working full time and had a young family this was not high on my list of concerns but still. Anyway, I continued to perform twice a year at birthday parties for my kids and their friends, again to the expected applause and merriment. Punch really is a rascal and they love him for it. My show is the old traditional one, including the hanging scene, which is rather black. The poor baby's "suicide" by defenestration usually needed some excusing to the parents (as well as Judy). But still.

We moved from the East coast to the Mid-West with the same reaction – great fun for each volunteered show but no repeats or requests. The question is why?

I made several attempts to contact performers in the USA and see what I was missing, with little luck. There are not many active professors. A few vestiges, a few interested nibbles, but nothing substantial. The general feedback was "There is no interest, it's not PC (Politically Correct)." We might add that when kids are steeped in politically correct television (PC-TV) and despite the abundance of puppet figures on TV, live puppetry is only another event. Punch and Judy is not part of the heritage of USA children. In the UK, you have P&J Toothpaste, P&J Sweets, P&J Biscuits and so on. Moreover, with the decline of arts education in USA schools the sensibilities of kids are reduced, and there has been a general decline in puppetry as an art form.



Punch is indeed not-PC but he never was and never will be, and this is his appeal. He is a hero but not in the manner of James Bond. Bond is a figure we would like to copy if we could for the cars and women. Punch *au contraire* is not suave, he is a grotesque with a squawking voice and a wicked man who tells lies and kills people, not for a martini but for a laugh. His jokes are based on the dichotomy of display versus emulation – that is, we admire his audacity and laugh but don't dare copy. For example, the heightened awareness of women's rights today which, let me add I absolutely support, makes Punch and Judy unacceptable to the literal minded. (Similarly, we have a hard time accepting the submission of Kate in last act of **THE TAMING OF THE SHREW**.) Punch's treatment of poor Judy, shrew as she is, is not an endorsement of wife beating. It's awful but funny – the core of black humor [*sic*] being to make a joke over a serious matter, often death. "Judy's not dead, she's sleeping". This is only one of the many non-PC elements of the drama (they come one after another) which ensure Punch and Judy and their cronies are not nowadays acceptable even as traditional comic figures. Critics without

a sense of humor do not find the show at all funny because in 30 minutes it mocks most of our sacred subjects from family to religion.

I would note that I do take account of local sensitivities by not using the Black Man in my show. He's a minor figure of comic relief and it would indeed be offensive to display him because of the history of racism in the USA. Racism is inherently different from the more universal tensions between men and women - discuss.

There is a story, perhaps apocryphal, that after a P & J performance in California, the mother phoned the police to complain about it. Presumably the professor beat a hasty retreat (as of old) and was not invited back.

Where does this leave us? We know that Punch was busy in the USA in the later 19th and early 20th century within the immigrant communities which made up a large part of the population. This is well documented in the excellent **PUNCH AND JUDY IN 19TH CENTURY AMERICA** by Ryan Howard (2013). There were performances at fairs, parks, resorts, vaudeville stages, and circuses. Broadway shows and at Radio City Music Hall saw appearances from Punch. Some performers specialized in Punch and Judy while others included the show as part of their repertoire. After the 1940's his allure faded, and while there have been some vigorous recent performances of Punch and Judy in the USA by UK professors, this has not generated much permanent native interest. He is still around - there was a P&J Faire in Seattle in 1999 for example. There is even a gay version, **PUNCH AND JIMMY** by Paul Zaloom (available on YouTube). Yet the forces of conservatism are winning over those of humor.

I am not quite ready to give up, and I still volunteer shows, say once a year on Independence Day, to considerable acclaim, but the future of the "immortal" Punch in the USA is not promising. I am reluctant to make nice by eliminating the elements of black humor and anarchy from the show in the name of PC, "pulling the teeth" as they say, because this basically nullifies the whole premise of Punch. On the other hand, perhaps I am painting myself into a corner here and I should broaden the show's appeal and add some magic, music, or performing animals.

Moreover, at a personal level, it increasingly exercises me as to what to do with this legacy when I am past performing. No keen young acolyte has come forward. It would be sad to have the show relegated to "historical interest" only.

Although I suspect many of the same forces are in play, it is a heartening to know that the PJF is going strong in the UK, and the art is not in immediate danger of being lost. But still.

If you have any comments, please email me at peter@sandsmith.com.

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