

The Punch and Judy Show
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Lecture given by Bertie Pearce



2006 the Department of Media Culture and Sport initiated the Icon Debate – to discover cultural icons that best represented Englishness. Punch and Judy got into the top six along with Holbein's portrait of Henry VIII !!

9th May 1662 – Covent Garden – is considered the birthday of Mr. Punch. This is because Samuel Pepys stumbled across an Italian Puppet play in which Pulcinella featured. Pulcinella was anglicized to Punchinello. He is a manifestation of the Lord of Misrule and Trickster figures of deep-rooted mythologies.

Pepys mentioned Punch and Judy a number of times in fact in his diary. The first of these was on May 9th, 1662, when he recorded that he had been 'mighty pleased' by an Italian puppet show near St. Paul's Church in London's Covent Garden. It is from this entry that Mr. Punch's 'birthday' is now traditionally calculated by today's Punch and Judy community.

It is, though, quite feasible, that Pulcinella was in the country some time before that date but until any written evidence of an earlier sighting comes to light, Pepys is popularly credited as 'the man who discovered Mr. Punch'.

Before 1662 was over that Italian puppeteer had performed in front of Charles II himself.

At this point in history, Punch was a marionette (Pelham Puppets were based at Marlborough in later times).



Samuel Pepys

In order to understand Punch, we have to go back way further in time and the classical influence. The Greeks and Romans had a tradition of buffoonery – a bronze Roman mask found clearly has shades of Punch with its fixed grin, staring eyes and hooked nose. The Morality Plays in the 15th century also was an influence with the booth like theatre being reminiscent of Punch's striped puppet booth.

The jesters in Shakespearean times are also the forerunners of Mr. Punch – the universal clown.

Another huge influence on the history of Western Theatre was Comejia Delate. A new secular influence when the influence of the Morality Plays died out. Professional performers, usually wearing leather masks, would travel from place to place. Pantalone, a Venetian merchant, was an important character – always counting his money. He was always with a young wife.

De Torre, a lawyer philosopher from Bologne, immensely fat (because pasta originated from there) was a boring figure within the plays.

Zanney characters (from which we get Zany) were the lower class bawdy figures that also featured. One of these was Punchinello – loved by the audience. He went all over Europe and was adopted by many countries who gave him characteristics relating to them alone. The French gave him a hunchback which stuck for later times.

1660s there was a popular song in England of a character who kissed like Punchenello or a sucking pig!

In 1770 England “Joan” was the lowest of the low as far as those who were given the name and the best you could hope for was to be parlour maid!!!! In a production of Mr Punch in Bath in the 18th century, his wife was Joan.

Jonathan Swift

(30 November 1667 – 19 October 1745)

wrote a poem about Punch:



The Puppet Show

THE life of man to represent,
And turn it all to ridicule,
Wit did a puppet-show invent,
Where the chief actor is a fool.

The gods of old were logs of wood,
And worship was to puppets paid;
In antic dress the idol stood,
And priests and people bowed the head.

No wonder then, if art began
The simple votaries to frame,
To shape in timber foolish man,
And consecrate the block to fame.

From hence poetic fancy learned
That trees might rise from human forms
The body to a trunk be turned,
And branches issue from the arms.

Thus Daedalus and Ovid too,
That man's a blockhead have confessed,
Powel and Stretch the hint pursue;
Life is the farce, the world a jest.

The same great truth South Sea hath proved
On that famed theatre, the ally,
Where thousands by directors moved
Are now sad monuments of folly.

What Momus was of old to Jove
The same harlequin is now;
The former was buffoon above,
The latter is a Punch below.

This fleeting scene is but a stage,
Where various images appear,
In different parts of youth and age
Alike the prince and peasant share.

Some draw our eyes by being great,
False pomp conceals mere wood within,
And legislators rang'd in state
Are oft but wisdom in machine.

A stock may chance to wear a crown,
And timber as a lord take place,
A statue may put on a frown,
And cheat us with a thinking face

Others are blindly led away,
And made to act for ends unknown,
By the mere spring of wires they play,
And speak in language not their own.

Too oft, alas! a scolding wife
Usurps a jolly fellow's throne,
And many drink the cup of life
Mix'd and embittered by a Joan.

In short, whatever men pursue
Of pleasure, folly, war, or love,
This mimic-race brings all to view,
Alike they dress, they talk, they move.

Go on, great Stretch, with artful hand,
Mortals to please and to deride,
And when death breaks thy vital band
Thou shalt put on a puppet's pride.

Thou shalt in puny wood be shown,
Thy image shall preserve thy fame,
Ages to come thy worth shall own,
Point at thy limbs, and tell thy name.

Tell Tom he draws a farce in vain,
Before he looks in nature's glass;
Puns cannot form a witty scene,
Nor pedantry for humour pass.

To make men act as senseless wood,
And chatter in a mystic strain,
Is a mere force on flesh and blood,
And shows some error in the brain.

He that would thus refine on thee,
And turn thy stage into a school,
The jest of Punch will ever be,
And stand confessed the greater fool.

Punch's "rusty voice" is essential to any show – and Swift refers to it in his poem.

1765 Dr Johnston refers to the fact that the Devil is lustily portrayed by Punch.

Tom Jones also saw a puppet show and said that by leaving out Punch and his lusty wife Joan, the puppet show was spoiled.

Up til this time, Punch was performing predominantly to the upper classes but all of this was due to change. Madame de La Nash, in the 1760, put on "A Puppet Shew" in which "will be represented the lamentable Tragedy of Bateman, who died for Love With the comical humours of Punch, and his Wife Joan, with all the original Jokes, F.r.t, Song, Dances, Battles, Kickings etc.

The Tea kettle will boil at Eleven, and Master Punch will mount exactly at Twelve. The Tea kettle with boil at Six, and Master Punch will mount exactly at Seven.

Punch became a glove puppet at the great fairs of England – in the thick of the great carnivals that took place in the Industrial Revolution. Punch would not submit to any kind of authority.

Punch and Judy was never a children's show – it was a very rough, satirical, violent show that appealed to working class people.

Joan became "Judy" with her very red cheeks – the colouring was all about drink. Unfortunately beating up a wife was a relatively normal occurrence in working class England.

James Boswell, who died in the 1970s, painted a fairly iconic picture of a Punch and Judy performance.

"Being noosed" was often an expression for being married.

Only in 1857 were husbands allowed to divorce their wives and not until 1923 were wives allowed to divorce their husbands.

Punch had a baby (traditionally "Marmaduke") and Mrs Punch, Judy, was always trying to get him to look after it. Punch threw the baby down the stairs and was sentenced to be hung! On the one hand, the people hated the hanging – oppression of the working classes - but on the other couldn't keep away from being spectators. Jack Ketch was the most famous hangman of the time and Mr. Punch asked the puppet Jack Ketch to show him wear he should put his head – and Mr Punch duly hung him! The adult audience loved it – it was extraordinary that they were allowed to perform it for it was fairly subversive. There was usually a preacher who was preaching the consequences of these attitudes and behaviours fairly near the puppet booth.

The Devil also featured in the show and Mr Punch dealt with him too – the Law, the Devil and the Flesh were all developed within the show and Punch threw them all down the stairs.

There was also a need for characters that softened the atmosphere – one was the clown: Joseph Grimaldi – bringing the house down (from the Bar on the upper floor of the theatre) was a sign that a show was particularly good and worth leaving the enticements of the Bar for). Joey, in the show (Joseph Grimaldi) was the only character that did not get beaten by Punch.

Robert Peel's new police force was also represented by the policeman who featured in the show and who was again victimised by Mr Punch to the delight of the audience. The Beadle of the Parish, frightfully snooty, was also put down to the delight of the audience: "I am the Beadle of the Parish" to which Mr Punch replies: "The Beatle in the Porridge?"

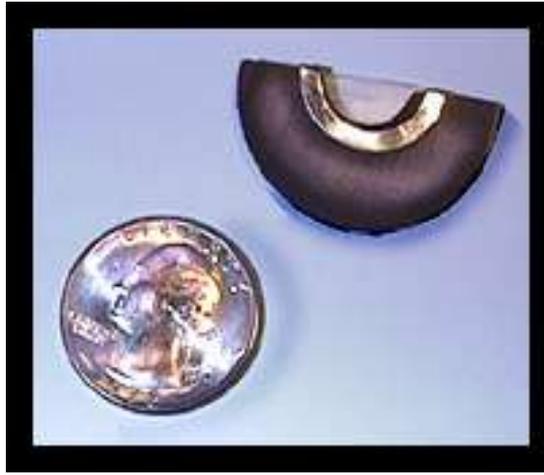
The most important status symbol you could have at the time was a black liveried servant and "Shalabalala" featured as the coloured servant of Mr Punch.

Toby the dog always featured also – and the sausages.

The slap stick was also essential – two pieces of stick with a spacer in the middle so that a wonderful noise was created without much effort. This implement gave its name to a whole genre: "Slapstick Comedy".

The crocodile was also an essential character. JM Barrie must have seen the crocodile in a Punch and Judy Show and put it into Peter Pan.

The swazzle was an essential element to producing the gravelly, rusty voice. "Joany", said with the swazzle, sounded like "Judy" and that was how the name of the show changed to "Punch and Judy".



In 1827 a journalist, artist and publisher decided it was important to capture the Punch and Judy Show – The Tragical Comedy of Punch and Judy" resulted and has never been out of print since then.

The 1820s and 1830s was a Golden Age for Punch and Judy

Punch Magazine was founded in 1841 – Punch is often used as a subversive symbol.

When someone wrote to Charles Dickens seeking to enlist his help in 'banning' Punch as a work of Satan, they evidently didn't know that he was himself a fan of the puppet show. Dickens' response is still quoted by performers today. He wrote

"In my opinion the Street Punch is one of those extravagant reliefs from the realities of life which would lose its hold upon the people if it were made moral and instructive. I regard it as quite harmless and as an outrageous joke which no one in existence would think of regarding as an incentive to any kind of action or as a model for any kind of conduct. It is possible, I think, that one secret source of pleasure very generally derived from this performance is the satisfaction the spectator feels in the circumstances that likenesses of men and women can be so knocked about without any pain or suffering".

(The Letters of Charles Dickens, Vol V, 1847 - 1849. Ed. G. Storey and K.J.Fielding. Clarendon Press 1981. The letter was written on Nov. 6th.)

The middle of the 19th century was the time when Gentleman v Players became a feature and Punch was at that time Punch became an inkwell, and all sorts of useful implements and was finally welcomed into the Nursery.

The Ruling Classes hated the Great Fairs and with the birth of the railways they wanted to get the working classes out onto the beaches to get the open air. This was the era of the birth of the resorts and Punch and Judy went there to perform!

None of the essential characteristics of the English Punch and Judy Shows have transferred into other countries where Punchenello first travelled.

Punch is a universal clown and Lord of Misrule. "That's the way to do it!"