

THE SLAPSTICK SYMPOSIUM PAPERS

PAPER ONE

PUNCH'S HOME TRUTHS

Presented by 'Prof' Dan Bishop

Dan Bishop currently presents 'The First and Last Punch & Judy Show' at Lands End in Cornwall. He is a seasoned UK beach performer and has travelled extensively overseas presenting traditional Punch and Judy at international festivals.

Introduction.

There are those performers who dislike discussion about the traditional Punch and Judy show and its 'meaning' - even find it a pompous exercise and prefer just 'to do it'. But to be in charge of such a highly powerful vehicle without knowing how or why you're driving it seems reckless to me. For me, the exploration of the past and present role of Punch in his relationship with his audience is a vital and continuous process - and necessary too if I hope to be clear and effective in my response to 'silly season' journalists whenever the next spate of newspaper nonsense crops up.

All performers of Punch and Judy will be aware of this media habit of periodically seizing on Mr Punch and his use of the slapstick as a subject for debate, though, sadly, these debates are seldom in depth. We have all been invited countless times to respond on the air, on television or in the press to the superficial questions of reporters bent on filling their two minute slots or narrow columns, and we have all experienced the disappointment of the resulting shallow and inaccurate coverage which almost invariably follows and which usually points to Mr Punch as an easy object of blame - a scapegoat - for the much deeper ills which undoubtedly lie at the heart of human society.

If I believed Mr Punch was an agent for the encouragement of violence I would not have spent twenty five years of my life aiding and abetting him.

So, in 1997, whilst preparing an essay for a booklet (published in conjunction with a fine exhibition at Essex University celebrating the history and tradition of Punch and Judy), I found the piece developing into a personal statement -argued as coherently as my capabilities allow - in defence of Punch. That essay - with some minor revisions - forms the basis of the paper that follows.

MR PUNCH'S HOME TRUTHS.

There's been a lot of nonsense written recently about p.c. in relation to the traditional Punch and Judy Show.

Discussion of this kind is seldom the result of considered reasoning and more often

the product of a growing and alarming trend in our tabloid age towards a kind of pseudo-intellectualism. It seems to me that various arms of the media are now able to manipulate citizens on a daily basis, and in huge numbers, into forming instant opinions based on nothing more substantial than catchy or emotive headlines.

Given the accuracy of this overview the scale of the threat to the social and political health of our nation might be considered awesome.

A bunch of journalists high on L.C.D.

It is a relief to me, therefore, that I need only make this point in specific relation to my subject, namely: that the Punch and Judy show, far from being an advocacy for violence, wife battering and child abuse, offers us a comic and deceptively simple dramatic reflection of humankind in all its strengths and weaknesses.

In short, Punch holds up a mirror to us all, firmly identifies our shortcomings, then offers us absolution through the panacea of laughter.

On May 9th 1662 Samuel Pepys wrote of witnessing a performance of 'Pollicinella' in London's Covent Garden. This is the earliest known appearance of the character who was to become known as Punchinello and it is thought that at this time he was a marionette.

It was not until about 1785, however, that Punch finally emerged as a glove puppet.

Now at last he was able to move as swiftly as his wit,, and wield a slapstick in visual punctuation of his comedy. His grotesque appearance, his roots in the exaggerated and larger than life style of Commedia dell' Arte and the artfulness of the Jester were consolidated. The show was mobile now and only required two operators. The constraints of working in the street forced these showmen into strict economies of dramatic action, creating the short and sharp impact necessary to hold a street audience, make them laugh and persuade them to contribute a coin.

And so it seems that a kind of miraculous distillation process occurred at this particular time, allowing all these contributory factors simultaneously to converge in the final realisation of one of the most popular street corner celebrities of all time.

Illustrations and paintings in this Golden Age of Punch's show will reveal that his audience consisted mainly of adults. Although it seems clear that the proportion of children watching the show increased as the years passed, it was not, perhaps, until the railways came and began to convey people to the seaside resorts that Punch adapted finally to the family audience.

Since then the public has increasingly grown to perceive Punch and Judy as a

children's show. It is important, though, to consider that the fundamental structure of the show originated with adult audiences in mind. Interestingly, this in no way prevents children from enjoying it.

So what was it in these street performances which persuaded men and women to stop, become absorbed, laugh uproariously and even part with money?

A Punch and Judy show consists of a series of short, comic encounters between Punch and a sequence of characters. It is received wisdom that each of these encounters should last for about three minutes. (To this day, Punch professors watching another of their number flouting this rule in performance begin to shift uneasily from foot to foot)

Some of the figures that Punch confronts have grown in popularity over the years, whilst others have waned. For example, the Crocodile only began to appear in the middle to latter part of the nineteenth century whilst Pretty Polly (Punch's girl friend) was disappearing during the earlier part of the same century. (Recently, she has been spotted again.)

However, the most familiar characters (Joan - later Judy; the Baby; the Beadle - or Policeman; the Doctor; the Ghost; Joey the Clown; etc.) have endured, for each of them personify aspects of the human predicament, and together they represent a pretty comprehensive range of the personal stresses, anxieties and frustrations most of us face on a daily basis. It's true that our modern society has undergone huge changes since those early years but our preoccupations are probably not so different even today: marital strife; resentment of authority; our potential for anger wickedness; fear of punishment - of dying - of disease; our feelings of guilt; etc, etc.

So it was that people were drawn by this absurd and yet powerful persona as he swaggered up and down his little stage engaging, as it were on their behalf, this sequence of parodied representations of their adversaries and adversities.

Punch displayed - in comic exaggeration - all those extremes of primal emotion that exist deep in all of us: between the savage and the civilised - the Jekyll and Hyde. It was, perhaps, as though they had found in Punch a distorted yet forgiving mirror-image of themselves, softened by humour, in which they were allowed a brief, unflattering glimpse of their own human imperfections and private uncertainties.

The very real day to day troubles of the spectators in the street could somehow be lightened as they watched Punch emerge from every conflict - always victorious and triumphant - with his deliciously simple slapstick solutions to all their problems.

To examine more closely this catharsis Punch offered them consider the scene with Jack Ketch the Hangman. At the time when this scene came into its own (probably early nineteenth century) those unfortunate enough to be sentenced to public hanging

could expect huge crowds to turn up to witness their execution. Sometimes they were sentenced for relatively minor crimes by today's standards. In a world without social security, a life of petty crime might have seemed the only solution to many of the people without work and facing starvation, so the spectre of the hangman must have loomed large in their lives. Imagine, then, the belly laugh as this solemn figure, bent on hanging Mr Punch for his crimes, is instead outwitted into hanging himself,

Similarly, the more officious the Policeman's demeanour, (or the Beadle in those days) as he announced that: "I'm come to take you up!", the more uproarious the laughter as Mr Punch declared - stick at the ready - : "And I'm come to take you down!!"

Again, the consultation with the Doctor represents another of our perennial preoccupations. Every age has its deadly or incapacitating disease whether it be Aids or the Black Death, and we all delight in seeing this pompous figure with his bad news brought down a peg.

Then there is the Baby. I challenge anyone to deny that, deep down, there is a dark place in all our hearts which, when faced with a baby that cries and cries and cries - loudly and for a long time - would privately like to strangle the little blighter! Of course, this is the Mr Hyde we can never allow to get out of control. However, Punch can. He can both expose and express those feelings for us -and without harm to anyone. Indeed I have noticed that those who laugh loudest at this scene are invariably the parents of small children!

Mr Punch is good for our health. He offers remedy for those troublesome aspects of our primitive selves we might otherwise repress. His anarchic medicine is as fresh and relevant to the needs of today's citizens as it was in the seventeenth, eighteenth, nineteenth and twentieth centuries - and will undoubtedly continue to be so in the twenty first.

On occasions, there are opportunities to present the show at puppet festivals overseas - especially in more recent years. There is a strong tradition of puppet festivals in many European countries and in other parts of the world. It is always gratifying to find audiences ready to invest Punch's tradition with a cultural dignity it rarely receives in the U.K. For example, during a recent visit to the Tyumen State Puppet Theatre in Siberia, I was to perform in a large, well equipped puppet theatre to an audience which was mainly adult. After some initial explanation of the history of the show they were quick to look for layers of meaning in its performance aside from the pure narrative, rhythm and humour - and to embrace it as an example of British folk art. What a treat for its performer- and how that kind of response feeds a performance. Over the years Punch has always adapted to his changing public and faced with a foreign audience ready to receive him with such a generosity of intelligence (or an adult U.K. audience come to that), he effortlessly adapts again. (He had to adapt to an audience of Palestinian refugees on the Gaza Strip once too!)

It also becomes clear when performing overseas how accessible Punch is to so many cultures and how universally his *raison d'etre* is understood. Having said this, it has been suggested that in Germany and also in the U.S.A. there is a marked lack of enthusiasm towards the 'violence' in the performance of Punch and Judy. (Of course, I don't acknowledge that puppets using the technique of slapstick comedy does constitute depiction of violence at all, and actually in my experience of working German audiences, their understanding of slapstick comedy as administered by an unrepentant Mr. Punch has been every bit as instinctive as that of a British audience. They had no trouble whatsoever with it. It's their own traditional character, Kasperl, who has the problem as we will see. If the authentic enactment of humans perpetrating violence on others is something which troubles people - and it should - there are plenty of graphic examples of that every night on T.V. - usually of American origin.)

However, if we accept that there is any truth in this suggestion at all, and if we further accept that Punch does indeed offer humankind a comic mirror-image - warts and all - would it be fair to conclude that this reveals a society uncomfortable with its own frailties and reluctant to reflect on them ?

I think this may be the case, and, moreover, that those in Britain who are also all too ready to shoot this particular red-nosed messenger would do well to pause and listen to his 338 year old message - his home truths. After all, it could certainly be argued that our own society is becoming more violent, and this brings us neatly back to discussion of p.c. in relation to the Punch and Judy show.

We should question closely those who would seek to undermine Punch's authority with superficial criticism of his 'violence'.

Any U.K. audience knows who Punch is, and I know from my own experience at my regular summer 'pitch' at Land's End that his large family audience is consistently enthusiastic - year after year - and shows no sign whatever of dissatisfaction over his antics, it's almost as though he's in our blood stream or part of our genetic makeup. But familiarity breeds contempt, they say, and paradoxically perhaps it is this very popularity that leads the British to take Punch for granted and not look for more depth of meaning in his role in our society.

Don't let our hero go the way of Kasperl (Punch's cousin from Germany) who at one time had all the potency of Punch. Now, according to Peter Waschinsky, a puppeteer from Berlin, this tradition is fatally damaged as a result of decades of changing social and political attitudes towards Kasperl, and I can testify to the truth of this from recent personal observation. (I am told he was even used by Hitler's regime in propaganda.) Kasperl is now reduced to the status of an emasculated and neurotic simpleton and Peter insists it would be artificial to try to resuscitate a patient so clearly brain dead.

It saddens me greatly to read that some Punch professors even entertain the idea that

Punch should cease to use his stick at all, or that some American puppeteers attempting to introduce performance of Guignol (one of Punch's French relatives) to U.S. audiences actually found it necessary to explain that the use of the slapstick was funny, that people shouldn't try it at home and that their theatre company does not promote violence. (I dare say there are some who may think that slapstick comedy originated in America in the days of Chaplin.)

No - Punch must never apologize, and there are fortunately enough performers who know this to guarantee his safe passage in the twenty first century.

Let's celebrate the vigour and invincibility of our own Mr Punch, and take a little more pride in this three centuries old British tradition. Although there are many other such national puppet characters throughout Europe and beyond, few achieve Punch's immediacy of connection with his audience.

I have no doubt he will continue to adapt to the needs and wishes of future generations and delight and champion his public for centuries to come.

The other day I overheard Punch asking Judy what she thought of his cathartic manifestation. She told him not to be disgusting and hit him with a frying pan.

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THE SLAPSTICK SYMPOSIUM PAPERS
PAPER TWO
PUNCH'S WOMEN PERFORMERS
Presented by 'Prof' Caz Frost

Caz Frost is a puppeteer who specialises in the UK's National PuppetShow. She is noted for the way in which Judy is given a voice often denied her in a show that is still completely authentic within the Punch tradition.

I've been a Punch Professor now for 30 years. It is a part of my identity, and a delightfully silly platform for speaking my mind. As a tradition the Punch and Judy show has always kept the elements that work for it's audience, whilst also moving on with the times. I created my Punch show in the seventies. I was a psychedelic drama student, much excited by the anarchy of it all. I saw how puppets could say and do the things we'd like to but can't. And as well as adapting over the years to the gradually changing nature of the audiences I meet, I've watched my particular version of Punch and Judy adapt to my own changing views and perceptions.

People are often surprised to see a woman doing a Punch and Judy Show. Women are a minority in the Punch Profession, but there are quite a few of us - at least 15 in the UK - that I know of. Bearing in mind that Mr Punch is a folk hero/rogue/ scoundrel/ trickster of the opposite sex from ourselves, why are we so keen to portray his story?

And what might the women Professors add to the drama of the tradition?

Should I, like one or two of my feminist colleagues, be presenting the show as Judy and Punch? And if I did, would Judy be the anarchic trickster, knocking down every adversity, every irritation that gets in her way? This would be a very different story, with a radically different Judy, and Punch would feature incidentally, as one of the characters she meets. To present the drama in this way would certainly fit with tradition. In a society still struggling with issues around male domination, a wacky little female anarchist puppet, coming out on top, would turn the world, as we know and understand it, upside down - just what the show is all about. I harbour a dream of creating, or reinstating (from folk-tradition or mythology) such a character, but not within the Punch and Judy Show. My challenge, with our little drama of British heritage, is to use the evolved and evolving characters of Punch and Judy to reflect more subtly the continuing struggle the ordinary person has with the problems of everyday life - relationships, responsibilities, authority, bureaucracy, social etiquette, corruption and sexual repression. Punch, on my right hand, represents the side of my nature which just wants to knock my troubles down, throw responsibility out of the window, caution to the wind, overcome my fears and satisfy my desires. The characters on my left hand represent the social and internal controls that stop me from doing this. When I perform the show I enjoy playing with these inner conflicts in a way which my audience can relate to. This means identifying the themes which are common to all, and making fun with them. It also means understanding the character and history of the patriarch, Mr Punch.

The Punch and Judy show is a surviving remnant of ritual folk drama, where the protagonist meets different antagonists, one after another and usually in a situation of conflict. The traditional Punch and Judy show presents Punch as the simpleton hero, who successfully outwits various characters, representing his oppressions, in order to gain his freedom. This 'clever fool' type is often portrayed as a male anti-hero in folklore, (Jack, Til Eulenspiegel, Clever Hans, Monkey, Anansi and Brer Rabbit are some examples). Somehow he always manages to achieve through his stupidity what others fail to achieve by concentrated effort. Punch is a combination of the fool and trickster. His characteristics are a collection of the archetypal shadow masculine traits, those which are socially deemed to be undesirable - cowardice, lewdness, rudeness, stupidity, fickleness, irresponsibility, selfishness, greed and violence or cunning as a way out when oppressed or cornered. These traits exist in us all, male and female, deep down in the psyche. They are a part of the human spirit which we try hard not to own up to; they whisper to us of anarchy and chaos. The trickster's role is to reflect back to us a ridiculously distorted image of what is there on the inside, carefully hidden away. This way we do not forget it. We laugh and acknowledge that our deepest human failings exist. By laughing at them we momentarily let go of the control we must usually exert over them.

Mr Punch, the trickster, carnival fool, king of anarchy, is an absurd masculine archetype of those aspects of the human psyche that want to turn the world upside down and create chaos. His gross appearance - the bulbous hooked red nose and the phallic 'hump' on his back, comically reinforce his male sexuality, along with the big red slapstick, which he wields as the answer to all his troubles. His character and

appearance have their roots in the ancient ritual dramas, celebrating birth, death, resurrection, conflict and fertility. In our 'civilised', hierarchical, bureaucratic and patriarchal society Mr Punch has evolved and survived through the centuries as our national 'Lord of Misrule.'

As protagonist, albeit in the form of anti-hero, Punch must, in terms of ancient dramatic convention, meet his antagonists in conflict and surpass them. Being a masculine archetype, it makes sense that these antagonists will symbolically represent fears and irritations from male fantasy. Could this be why Judy emerged from the street shows of Victorian London as the long-suffering, 'kissy-kissing', nagging, controlling mother-hen/wife who must be knocked senseless to allow Punch his escape? Some psychoanalytical experts maintain that this is representative of the male need to emotionally break away from the mother in order to mature into manhood.

Punch men often portray Judy as a wonderfully fussy, bossy pantomime dame type with a high falsetto voice. (Note that this makes the character a parody of the male's fantasy of woman). When knocked down, she bobs up again several times in comic protest, always with one more thing to say. This creates a 'jack-in-the-box' effect that makes the audience giggle. Sometimes her final utterance is almost orgasmic in nature so that the mock puppet death we are witnessing might more closely resemble 'le petit mort', of the sexual act, rather than actual mortality. The discerning audience (eg. an audience of robust, healthy children), watching a skilfully presented version of this scene, will not be moved to imitate the implied violence, as some critics of Punch and Judy suggest. Such an audience will know that these are puppets playing at fighting in the same way as children play -fight. They will know that these are two hands, right and left, representing inner conflict of the ordinary human spirit. They will know that the characters resurrect and re-enact in the next show. Emotionally healthy persons, both adult and child, will feel a surge of cathartic delight at this playfully absurd and comical portrayal of their own deep urges to violence, urges which they must usually suppress or control.

Thus, in the Punch tradition, Judy has emerged as antagonist to Mr. Punch's protagonist and represents the controlling mother figure. Conventionally, she must therefore be knocked out of the way, along with the other antagonists - the policeman, the quack doctor, the ghost, the crocodile, the hangman, the devil - all representing forces which oppress Mr Punch.

Now, as a Punch professor, I have the great privilege of presenting this story of man's oppression from the point of view of a woman. I choose, therefore, NOT to have Judy knocked down, so that I can use her character to demonstrate a growing awareness of new status in women in society today. (I should state here that quite a lot of other Punch Profs., both male and female, are similarly updating their performances). This is flouting convention - and it's fun. I also have great opportunity to play with other elements of the show from a feminine point of view.

Some of my colleagues, particularly women Punch professors, say let Judy give Punch as good as she gets - a proper whacking. But my current view is that feminism

has moved on from the 'fighting back' syndrome. We are looking beyond 'equality' for women as being and having and doing the same as men. Therefore if the Punch versus Judy scenario is going to mirror today's trends in the male versus female debate, perhaps we women professors should portray Judy as taking the initiative and defining herself as a woman. Jane Bartlett tells me that in her show Mr Punch has to earn his kiss and Judy 'calls the shots.' MY Judy insists that Mr. Punch stay at home with the baby rather than going down the pub again. When Mr Punch asks why, she retorts that it's HER turn to go down the pub (and therefore his turn to take responsibility for the baby). When she returns to discover that Mr Punch has inadvertently (in true 'ignorant simpleton' style) made the baby into sausages she is, as any woman would be, at first distraught and then angry. However, having fully expressed her grief and given Mr Punch a piece of her mind she quickly moves into acceptance, and realises this is her opportunity for freedom: "Well now Mr Punch - You made the baby sausages so you can look after the baby sausages! That's fair! I'm going to claim the insurance money and take a nice little holiday in Majorca. No, you can't come with me. You're to stay at home and look after the little sausage".

And off she goes, leaving Mr Punch and the sausages to the mercy of a big green crocodile with tooth-filled gaping jaws. Her triumph is that she has called Mr. Punch's bluff. Rather than waiting to be knocked out of his way, Judy leaves him with the consequences of his mistakes and removes herself to a more fulfilling situation. She does the separating off. This gives Judy an equal status to Punch in the drama, although he still remains at the centre of the story and fulfils his usual trickster role with his other adversities.

No doubt my experience as a woman has also had some influence upon the way I play some of the other traditional scenes. For example, I brandish a very female crocodile, with long curly eyelashes and red lipstick. Here is my opportunity to celebrate how powerful and, dare I say it - scary - female sexuality can seem to the ordinary male, no matter how brazenly he may be wielding his big red stick. Robert Leach, in his book, 'The Punch and Judy Show' has this to say about the crocodile: "The crocodile is.... a cruel devouring hole, which snaps at whatever Mr. Punch thrusts at it." The crocodile may swallow Punch's sausages, his stick, his nose and in some versions of the show, even Punch himself. Watch Mr Punch innocently stroke and tickle what he has mistaken for a giant "pussy, pussy", urging it to open up and give him back his sausages and notice the reactions of grown men in the audience. (They either bellow with laughter, or cross their legs, or both).

"But what about the baby?" I hear you cry. Many Punch men hesitate to portray the 'Baby into sausage-machine' scene, so full of black Victorian humour, for fear of being seen to be politically incorrect. And here I am, a woman and mother, describing not only the transformation of the baby into sausages but also the disappearance of the sausages down the crocodile's wide open mouth. So how do I talk my way out of that one? Easy!

On the literal level, anyone can see that the baby is a lump of cloth with a face 'just like his father's'. And when the sausages appear from the machine with the same cloth

pattern as the baby's nightgown it is impossible to take the event seriously. More subconsciously, the baby does not represent a real baby at all, but merely Punch's own immaturity and inability to take responsibility for himself. This is what Judy removes herself from, and quite right too.

From this point Mr Punch struggles to grow up. He defeats his misunderstanding and fear of the crocodile, flouts the law with adolescent bravado, refuses to be completely conned by the quack doctor, tricks his way out of the whining hangman's noose and finally triumphs over the devil. You see, with all it's failings the ordinary human spirit can win through and survive! People laugh because, even as adults, we still sometimes meet with the bits of us that don't always feel like being respectably grown up. And audiences of children certainly understand the struggle.

I've made some attempt to demonstrate how I enjoy presenting our national folk drama as a woman. The privilege of the puppeteer is to be able to present and parody all kinds of caricatures which mirror the absurdities of everyday (and not so everyday) life. Man can play woman and woman can play man. We can play beast or bird, queen or beggar, and exaggerate the ridiculous with magical devices, such as the swazzle, which can drastically alter the sound of our voice. We are modern day shaman and shamanesses, with '...mastery over spirits and forces which, uncontrolled, create chaos and sickness.' (Rogan Taylor. The Death and Resurrection Show). The healing power of our noisy little street performance comes through the laughter and involvement it invokes in it's audience. And, traditionally, it reaches parts of society that other theatre forms can't reach.

THE SLAPSTICK SYMPOSIUM PAPERS

PAPER THREE

PUNCH AND POLITICAL CORRECTNESS

Presented by 'Prof' Clive Chandler

Clive Chandler busked for many seasons on the streets of Stratford Upon Avon and plays regularly at festivals, carnivals, galas, shopping malls and the complete spectrum of public places where currently Mr. Punch performs his show.

Ladies and gentlemen, welcome aboard this Slapstick Symposium Special. Please extinguish your cigarettes and fasten your seat belts, as we set out on a brief journey entitled "Punch and political correctness". My name is Clive Chandler and I shall be your Driver and Guide for the next twenty minutes or so, as we wind our way around, and sometimes straight through, some of the issues implied in the title of our tour. Hold tight, it's a bit of an old banger. Here we go...!

According to my schedule the first stop is to be a nightmarish place where little children stare with frightened eyes and adults look on in disgust. I speak of course of the infamous Punch and Judy. It is we are led to believe a truly offensive spectacle

shot through with strands of sexism and racism. Yes, we see before us the infamous Punch and Judy Show. This, they say, is an awful place where violent behaviour is glorified in the name of entertainment, and justified on the thin pretext of historical precedent.

Unfortunately we will be unable to call there today, for one simple reason. It doesn't exist. It is a fiction. This is a mythical version of Punch and Judy.

Hold the image in your head for a moment though; it is important that our journey starts from here. Why? Because this is the image of the Punch and Judy show, which is first conjured up and then criticised by those who seek to speak for Political Correctness.

As an alternative we are happy to take you to a real place that looks and sounds quite different.

Hold onto your hats, - we will be arriving shortly.

Although we are as yet still far off, you can sense that we are getting closer from the tell-tale shouts of glee and laughter. This is a dream of a place. This time it is real. (Paradoxically, it also where you can leave reality behind for a little while). This is a place where generations are beside themselves with laughter and call out with jollity. Grandparents remember watching something similar many years ago when they were little. They remember too taking their now grown-up children when they were little, to see such a thing. Now they watch their grandchildren experiencing the same delights.

Times change but the laughter of children is a constant. There is a warm sense of fun surrounding the whole occasion. The quick movements of funny little figures gives rise to great mirth, and the wit of the performer behind the performance is greeted with giggles. This is an oft-repeated scene that has a firm grip the popular imagination.

Punch has no publicity budget at all but you'd be hard put to find a single child or adult who did know who he was. Punch belongs not to the establishment but to the people themselves.

To be honest, although I'm your guide; I can't be sure exactly where we are. Perhaps we are in a Shopping Mall. We could be on a beach, or heading down a shopping Mall. We could be in somebody's back garden or at the Vicar's tea party. We could even be in a Park in Birmingham. In fact, we could be in all of those places at the same time.

And now I must ask you all, to step off the bus for a while and to breathe in a little,

because I want to squeeze our party into a very narrow place.

I want to position us between the Punch and Judy Show and its audience. From here we should have a perfect view in both directions. If we look one way we will see the crowd assembled in a gentle curve. It ranges from small children on mats at the front to those who still have a child within them at the back. It is a genuine cross section of the public, in all senses, including sex and race. If we look the other way we can see the actions of the puppets themselves.

I suggest that you take the opportunity of taking in both these images. I'll pause for a moment for those of you with cameras to snap away,

It is not enough to try and understand something that is interactive by only looking one way. Any analysis based purely on the actions of the puppets, without witnessing the reactions of the public to those actions is a misleading analysis. This is a subtlety often missed by those who seek to criticise. In a very real sense they have a blinkered, and not a balanced view.

We don't have to debate these issues purely theoretically. All we have to do is to watch of a good Punch Show succeeds with its audience.

Time to get back on the bus.

Our next stop should be the local bank. If we peer inside and look for that performer's balance sheet, we will probably not find it bristling with figures in the black. However the job of that performer is to make a living and support whatever family he or she may have. To this end it does not serve them well to go around hawking offensive wares. There is a very simple but very simple imperative at work here. This means that the performance is continually filtered for that which may not be acceptable. This filter is strengthened by the fact that the make up of Punch and Judy show audience is so diverse. The show is also playing to Children and Adults at the same time, and whilst it can throw comments over the children's heads on occasion, it simply cannot afford to offend either the parents or the children.

Sometimes they are still passing the hat round; sometimes they are picking up a check. The professional performer needs to be sensitive to public opinion. The livelihood of that performer, and in a wider sense the continuance of the artform that performer practices, is dependent on that relationship. I would like to suggest that the best arbiters of public taste are the public themselves.

I must point out that I am seeking to show you Punch in the best light. Whilst the nightmarish image mentioned earlier is not one I recognise, there are shadier places

that I would prefer not to wander. Let's be honest, there may be a few sad humourless performances about.

As I mentioned earlier overall market forces should weed things out, but this may not be the case for those performers with other sources of income. Whilst it may be that a poor show could cause offence, but it would be unfair to judge any artform by its least capable exponents. The respect in which Punch is held often depends on which show an individual commentator has witnessed.

Whilst I would defend the essential essence of Punch on any occasion I would not be able to defend everything that every individual who chose to pick up a set of Punch Puppets might do with them. It seems likely that there have always been more or less proficient performers and that a positive image has always dominated. "Pleased as Punch" is the phrase that has entered the language, not "offensive as Punch".

There is also the sense in which different approaches to Punch might suit different audiences. Again the best performers usually have enough width to cope. However those whose shows are conditioned to narrower audience may not transfer well to a different audience elsewhere. If your audiences only ever consist of Sun readers, you might come unstuck in the presence of an audience of Guardian readers. Or visa versa. The best shows are those that can cater simultaneously for a mixed and wide ranging audience.

Punch and Judy is not one of those self working magic tricks that you can take down off the shelf. You don't just hold it up and pull a hidden lever to make it happen. It is a basic framework that the public welcome, but which benefits enormously from being continually tuned to suit its audience. That audience changes in many ways and in many parts of the country. We are now fortunate to have a wonderful cultural mix enjoying the show.

Time to get off the bus again. Time to get inside a Punch and Judy Booth.

One of the things about Punch is that we all know that there is somebody in there really. The degree to which we warm to, and trust that somebody, makes a big difference to how we react to the performance. We have previously visited that interactive space between the performer and the audience. Let us now take a look behind the scenes at that performer.

Sorry there isn't much room in here.

Those who feel that there is a political correctness case to answer with Punch always seem to presume that the points they are raising have never been considered by those who work within the Punch community, If we get close to performer we usually find that they are much sharper than that. In order to be a Punch performer at all (certainly a professional one) you really have to be quite clued up. It takes a range of skills and is not to be honest suitable for the slow-witted. All the top performers have a sense of the nature of the fire they play with, and they have usually thought about issues deeply. They are usually instantly wrong footed by a remotely intellectual reply, especially if it contains the words *Commedia dell'Arte*.

Of course it possible to be quick witted and also sexist or racist, but the point I am making is that it is wrong to underestimate the performers themselves.

Is everybody back? Good. Off we go.

It is a simple analysis that says that it is wrong to show characters behaving badly. I would suggest that there is no significant drama generated by people wandering around being good. Television for children is a strange thing, as parents in the audience will be aware. Lots of it is busy being correct and educational, Barney and the Tweenies go around being intensely co-operative and nice to each other in a completely unrealistic and antiseptic way.

Drama arises out of conflict. Punch and Judy is a series of ludicrous conflicts. It is literally the actions of one hand against another. It may be minimalist, but it is fundamentally dramatic.

But wait I hear someone on the backseats cry. The content of the show is undeniable. It is all about wife-beating isn't it? Well there is content and there is context. The important thing about a good performance of Punch is that it is funny. This is a key point that must be included in any analysis of its action. In fact I think while the show does have domestic strife at the heart of it, it is not about wife beating. It is about enjoying watching somebody behave badly. Mr Punch is clearly outrageous and that is what makes him so funny. This is knockabout and slapstick comedy. It is good fun to watch someone being naughty and getting away with it. Like Macbeth, we know that he is behaving badly, and although we take delight in this, we know that his behaviour is wrong. He even manages to beat the devil and thus out-Fausts Faust.

In drama we don't always learn morality from watching moral characters. We sometimes learn it from watching people behaving badly, which is usually more interesting. In morality plays it was the vices and not virtue that often stole the show. And Noah and Mrs Noah bickering that caught the crowd.

Moving on, if you look slightly to left (or indeed sometimes to the right) you will see several people seeking to scale a rather slippery. These are those individuals seeking to gain some advantage by occupying what we call the moral high ground. Having been elevated to some sort of position of authority they are casting about for issues to

pontificate upon.

These people have difficulty with that strange world of folk tales and nursery rhyme, in which babies fall from trees and Humpty Dumpty smashes to pieces and Jack falls down and breaks his crown. They have a similar problem with puppets banging about in a booth. They often have a quite disproportionate response to children singing traditional songs about black sheep.

They are sure that this is it is a simple thing to look down on the Punch and Judy show. These are the people who make a number of basic mistakes. They think of Punch as an out-dated entertainment that is no longer suitable. They fail to see that although it maintains much of its traditional shape it is continually adapted to the moral climate of its times, and that it therefore has as strong a grip now on the popular imagination as it ever has.

It is often outrageous, which is one of the reasons why it is so funny. It often pushes at the edges of what is acceptable. It is in some ways a perfect example of 'getting away with murder'. However it should never offend its audience.

Of course tastes change with time and location. At one time a foreigner who couldn't talk properly provided an amusing interlude in the show. You don't tend to see that now. The blind man is also not a regular performer. Some people are uncomfortable with the hanging scene, though others can still make it work. Many older spectators talk of seeing a performing dog Toby, but the tide has turned against performing animals. New things come in. I could take you on a quick excursion to see the devil calling Punch on his mobile phone, or Punch confusing the devil with Pikachu.

There is a need to continually review what might cause offence. Is it really only a few years ago that the BBC felt perfectly happy with The Black and White Minstrel Show?

Current events can often make things either topical or tasteless. The policeman has recently been heard threatening to lock Punch up " with all the Asylum Seekers". It was topical and funny, and in essence on the side of the asylum seekers. We could also go back and watch a Punch show following the tragic murder of James Bulger a few years back, and watch a Punch man who usually approaches the knockabout with the baby with over-the-top gusto, backing away from the scene altogether. That was not the time for it.

As we turn our eyes from those few on the moral high ground that us take a quick drive through time and space to look at the massive of people of creeds and complexions that would not agree with them. It is sometimes the case that a few comments catch the headlines. There was a recent case in Colchester. There the councillor was finally voted down by her own council! - but not before catching a few headlines. She hadn't thought through her argument and had seriously underestimated the esteem in which old Mr Punch is held. What we must do is to avoid assuming that

occasional comments against form anything like a statistically valid objection to Punch. I invite you to wave had all those millions who find him funny, and to smile gently at the odd objector as we pass them by.

There is much in political correctness that has taken hold. People are happy to talk about the Chair of an organisation, and people seem quite happy to talk of head teachers

If there were to be a contest between Punch and Judy and Political Correctness, I think I know in the long run which the victor would be. In many ways Punch is already the victor because almost since it first appeared in the language political correctness has been treated by a much deeper suspicion than Punch ever has. In the popular imagination it has become associated with trying to force particular views beyond the point of common sense, and has therefore fallen prey to the same kind of ridicule that greets European bureaucracy on the shape of bananas.

It is not the role of Punch to be offensive to its audience. That would be counter-productive folly. Nor should it be so arrogant as to dismiss all concern. It needs to keep its finger on the pulse of a wide range of opinion. On the other hand it is perhaps it is no bad thing that our national puppet has the ability to get up the nose of the establishment.

The thought that lies behind politically correct thinking is no doubt a sound one. We should think about causing offense to others. But Punch is out there being tested in front of a good cross section of the public everyday. It is vulnerable to changes in public taste and needs to respond appropriately. It does not need to be judged by those with a superficial understanding of what it is all about.

That brings us to the end of our journey. I'd like to thank you for travelling on the Slapstick Special.

THE SLAPSTICK SYMPOSIUM PAPERS PAPER FOUR

PUNCH IN THE 21st CENTURY

Presented by 'Prof' Glyn Edwards

Glyn Edwards is a self-described 'Punch and Judy activist' who has performed with Mr. Punch all over England at numerous overseas festivals. His recent book 'Successful Punch & Judy' is based on the courses he runs teaching the skills and traditions of the show.

As Mr. Punch looked around during the last Christmas season of the 20th Century what competition did he see for a place in the hearts and minds of his young fans?

Well, there was a Christmas single aimed at the festive market and released by 'Mr. Hankey the Christmas Poo' - a character from the TV animation series South Park. In anticipation of chart-topping success at the turn of the Millennium the shelves of High Street gift-shops were stocked with toy replicas of this wannabe star, ready to fit into countless Xmas stockings and appealingly crafted in brown fur.

Meanwhile Punch's baby peered all around and noted that in toy stores throughout the land another hot favourite for the nation's young was on sale in a featured range of Collectable Alien Foetuses.

Judy, casting her eyes around from within her marriage, could note that American TV would be screening a show called 'Who Wants to Marry a Millionaire?' in which the prize for one of the 'lucky' female contestants was to be claimed in matrimony by a certified millionaire. Already in the UK a radio show had brought face to face a man and woman who had never previously met, got them married and then sent them off on honeymoon with lavish spending money. They were divorced a short while later. All of this in the name of entertainment.

And what of Santa that Christmas? In nearby Toy Grottos there was a presumption that youngsters should perhaps not sit on his lap in order to whisper their requests for presents in his ear. This was not because Santa needed protecting from the hordes of youngsters keen on loading down his sleigh with orders for cuddly excrement or abortions from outer space - but because society had decreed that sitting on the lap of white-bearded old men had now, regrettably, acquired overtones of paedophilia.

Through the eyes and minds of his Professors Mr. Punch has to be a keen cultural observer and take note of these things around him. The changes in the cultural climate in which he operates are vital to his continued existence. He needs to know where society has currently set its boundaries for if he's out of step with his public he is out of a job and a centuries-long career is on the skids. So far he's seen great shifts in public attitude spanning Restoration Bawdiness, Victorian Values, the Naughty Nineties, Edwardian Imperialism, the Roaring Twenties, the Depression, the Swinging Sixties and Flower Power, the Yuppie Years and Political Correctness - and he's stayed in tune with his public throughout them all. Musical excreta won't faze him, neither will intergalactic foetuses, nor the transformation of marriage into a game show. He may, however, be a little surprised at finding himself required on occasion to defend his own topsy-turvy little drama when it is commented on as perhaps inappropriate for this day and age. Fortunately he has a great sense of humour.

The current Punch and Judy Show - is still derived very largely from the 19th Century and it traded on this legacy for most of the 20th. Many of today's performers present Punch with more than just a nod towards Dickens' London or to the rosy seaside memories of those day trippers who first followed the new-fangled railways as they made tracks for the coast. Some performers even regard it as holy writ that only puppet characters known to the Victorians have a place in the show. Respected (and now retired) performer Bob Wade said to me with pride that he'd had no character in his show more modern than the Beadle. But I beg to differ. Punch had strutted his

stuff as a string puppet for a hundred years or so before picking up his slapstick and acquiring a wife called Judy. The capers he cut are for the most part lost in the mists of history - but they were not those for which he became famous from the early 1800s. He has always adapted as times have changed - and he faces an interesting challenge at the turn of the 21st Century. It's been a century since the end of his Victorian triumphs. Is he going to try for another hundred years of harking back to a lost age or is he going to undergo another transformation? And if so what will it be?

It may be as well at this juncture to take a look at what Punch performers are actually doing with the show at this moment in history. Firstly it is generally agreed that the Punch and Judy show is alive and well and flourishing. Reports of its imminent death - heard since at least the beginning of the last century - are sufficiently old that it is now they who can officially be declared deceased. Look in any Business Telephone Directory in the UK and you will find a Punch Prof - or failing that an entertainment agency with Punch Profs on their books. Some areas have more than others but it is a far flung part of the land indeed that has none. If you compare this with related folk-puppet traditions of Europe it is an unparalleled success story for a humble piece of street-corner knockabout nonsense. But what of the shows themselves? What is presented out of these gaily striped little booths?

As you would expect from any branch of the performing arts from music to stand-up comedy, dance or circus there is a wide range in the performing abilities of the individuals concerned. This point is worth emphasising because there is often a general assumption that all Punch and Judy Shows are the same. A moment's pause for thought will reveal the underlying error of this view - but such a moment is not always taken either by his knee-jerk critics or by media commentators for whom subtlety of thought gets in the way of easy headlines. For such reasons Mr. Punch can be as easily undermined by the inadequate performer as he can be elevated by those who perform well.

All these performers present Mr. Punch within a few broad categories that I shall attempt to identify. There is Classic Mainstream Punch of the sort that the Victorians would recognise, and then there is Punch Lite, where performers present a nursery style show aimed at the very young. There is a smattering of New Age Punch where Old Red Nose's anti-authoritarian stance happily encompasses the villains identified by this section of society; and there is Radical Punch where the tradition is deliberately made to accommodate such novelties as 'Judy & Punch' or 'Punk & Judy'. There is also a broad category of World Punch, into which I will place all the variations of the tradition as they are played in societies other than the UK. And, at one remove, there is Theatre Punch where the 'traditional' tale is used as source material for different reasons either by actors or puppeteers. Harrison Birtwistle's opera *Punch & Judy* falls into this category, as does a recent American puppet play *The Sid and Nancy Punch and Judy* - which recasts the doomed characters in the Sid Vicious story within a Punch framework. Interesting though this latter category may be, it remains outside the scope of this paper which deals with the Punch and Judy Show proper.

The vast majority of Punch performances fall into the first two categories, and it is the second of these that provides a prospect of Punch's most dismal future. Faced with constantly performing to audiences aged five and under, some entertainers who earn a living (or pin money) performing at birthday parties in private homes have perceived a virtue in making Mr. Punch a bland and tame character dumbed down to the level of pre-school TV and thus more marketable to the mothers of infants. Under the banner of "non-violent Punch and Judy" they are intent on marching Mr. Punch into an infantile ghetto. May they instead march over a cliff rather than allow Mr. Punch to commit cultural suicide by mindless self-censorship. Rather Punch remain a Victorian 'heritage' entertainment than face a future as a toothless ninny.

The 'heritage' option for Punch (which Classic Mainstream Punch provides) is indeed an attractive one - yet it too contains pitfalls. He may survive another hundred years this way, even more, but as society moves forward Punch would inevitably become marooned in the past. He would increasingly become a historic novelty like Mummers Plays or Medieval Mystery Plays - resurrected out of a folksy curiosity but no longer meaningfully connected to contemporary society. Much of Punch's power today lies in the fact that he is both old and new at the same time. His show has a timeless appeal to adults who watch both with nostalgia and an appreciative maturity they were unable to bring to it when younger and at the same time he has an immediacy for the current generation of children, brought about by his sheer naïve comic energy and the sharing of a certain childlike naughtiness with his audience. For adults and children, too, topical references to persons or events in the news, or other shared cultural events, keep Mr. Punch rooted in the here and now.

Punch will, of course, need to recognise that some of the baggage he brings from the past is no longer relevant. Jokes that had the Victorians rolling in the aisles may not tickle modern funny bones - and nothing dates more quickly than topical humour. Just as we don't use Victorian topical one-liners today we also have to take care with topical attitudes within the script. Punch's traditional disposal of Judy with his stick carried a far different meaning when divorce was not available to the working class and this alternative solution could be played for laughs as a grim jest. When a family might have a dozen children yet see only one or two survive into adulthood the fate of Mr. Punch's baby was viewed within a different frame of reference from today's. At a time when public hangings were an excuse for a day out, Punch's classic parody of the event was very much a topical show-stopper. And when people from ethnic minorities were regarded as 'foreign and funny' in popular culture, their portrayal as such in the Punch and Judy Show was normal for the era. The Punch Prof of today must decide how to handle this material for contemporary audiences. Sticking to traditional attitudes for historical reasons is a lazy answer. New Age Punch and Radical Punch have both deliberately set out to connect the tradition to the values of particular sections of society - a useful reminder to the mainstream that Punch and Judy is a living tradition and able to respond to the public mood.

And this, ultimately is the means by Mr. Punch will develop. By give and take in the public arena. His good fortune is in that he connects directly with the widest possible cross-section of the general public. His best theatre is the street corner, the piazza, beach, village green, Shopping Mall or similar public space. All-comers of all ages

make up his audience, and this is why the tailoring of Punch to meet the needs of the under-fives party market is not appropriate for the tradition as a whole. Nor does he require the approval of intermediaries. Outraged local councillors, concerned teachers, progressive arts administrators, may all offer their opinions on the suitability (or otherwise) of the Punch & Judy Show - but it is at the bar of popular opinion where Mr. Punch rests his case. And to do this successfully he must understand what the broad base of his audience will accept. They know he is the joker in the pack whose antics are surreal, satirical and triumphantly opposed to conformity. He in turn, as mediated through the skills and brains of his Profs, knows that in order to thumb his nose at convention he must know what conventions society currently accepts.

As he enters the 21st Century Punch's tradition is as alive as it ever has been. He is one of the great success stories of world folk-puppetry and he's constantly in demand. He may not earn his living primarily from money collected in the streets or beaches, but only sentimentalists would regret this transformation from a precarious existence into one where his services as an entertainer are engaged by contract. Today in the UK he's seen at fetes, galas, Fun Days, carnivals and general celebrations where he is considered an attraction that draws the public. He's in demand at childrens' birthday parties, Christmas parties and even weddings. He does 'in store' promotions, he appears at heritage sites, he pops up in museums and arts centres - and he even goes overseas to meet up with his puppet relatives at festivals of traditional puppetry.

Punch doesn't face quite the same challenges as befell him when he transformed from a string puppet to a hand puppet, nevertheless Judy has played the same role in the show for nearly 200 years and society may now be looking for it to develop. Since Minstrel Shows dropped out of favour there has also been a need for a new role for the traditional black character. Dog Toby has gone back to being a puppet now that performing animals are widely considered unacceptable and who knows what other new puppet characters lie ahead ready to become regulars in Mr. Punch's cast. The crocodile - the last regular to join - is as firm a favourite as Punch and Judy themselves.

The answer to these questions - and to the future of Mr. Punch himself - lies solely with those who take him up and perform with him. Scholars and academics can tell us where he's been and what he's done - but they don't control him, they only chronicle him. What he does next, how he does it, and where the tradition goes, is in the hands of his Profs. Guided by his anarchic spirit they will continue to forge his future in the hurly-burly of public performance. It is their responsibility to keep this imp of mischief refreshed, renewed and invigorated and not let his tradition fossilise around him to become a 'heritage' prison. It's a living tradition - and so long as he stays true to his nature Punch can do what he likes.

That way he will be able to see off any occasional challenge from talented excrement - rather than find himself up to his neck in it.

