

Brian Henson and "Puppet Up! Uncensored" declare silliness a sign of maturity

BY **ANDREW FISH** PHOTOGRAPHY **RAINER HOSCH**
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Murderous fuzzy bunnies, foul-mouthed hot dogs jumping on a trampoline, an enormous stone idol receiving a colonic from his petite foam wife. Welcome to "Puppet Up! - Uncensored." What began as a course to teach puppeteers in comedy and spontaneity has blossomed into a hit monthly improvised puppet show, featuring the performers and fabricated creations of the legendary Jim Henson Company — and it ain't for kids. A rotating cast of dexterous humans and their resin-and-felt counterparts, helmed by Brian Henson — son of the late Jim Henson, creator of the beloved Muppet franchise — solicit suggestions from the crowd, which are then integrated into marvelously inane vignettes. Host Patrick Bristow, the designated non-puppeteer, challenges the audience to blurt out ideas and compete amongst themselves to produce the superior absurdity. Hence a class in tooth-arranging, followed by a Bea Arthur trivia quiz.

The success of the show was not by design, according to Henson. During the improv class, he noticed that the more pressure they applied to the performers, the funnier they became — so the boss turned up the heat. The troupe got even funnier upon subjection to the Aspen Comedy Festival, followed by a huge hit at Scotland's Edinburgh Fringe Festival. Cut to the present, and their recurring show at Avalon Hollywood theater is one of LA's hot tickets.

"Puppet Up!"'s subject matter may veer from its Muppet roots, yet the performers' — and the Henson Company's — overarching mission remains the same: to foster a sincere respect for silliness. As Henson explains, "What we're always trying to do is make fun of ourselves, and of life, in a smart way. To appreciate the absurdity of life, and the absurdity of all of us. And to laugh at that, and to enjoy that, and to appreciate that, and to ultimately honor that."

In line with this goal, the project's original purpose — to create funnier, more entertaining puppeteers — has been successful in its own right. As a result of their trial-by-fire training, says Henson, "The voice

of [their] comedy, the quickness of the comedy, their character choices, has started to really take root, and create a whole new voice for the Jim Henson Company doing comedy with puppets. And re-finding that position as the *funniest* puppets in the world. That's where we want to get back to."

With seeming incongruity, he considers the September 1 premier of the company's "Sid the Science Kid," a PBS educational preschool show, to be a triumph of "Puppet Up!"'s tutelage. "You couldn't be content-wise further away from 'PuppetUp!'" remarks Henson, "and yet [the performers'] skills at developing a personality that's entertaining, and their skills at timing and rhythm and spontaneity, and feeling free to ad-lib just a little bit to sharpen up that scene, is really starting to show."

Upon recalling the heyday of Kermit, Miss Piggy, Gonzo, Fozzy Bear, and the Swedish Chef ("Bork, bork, bork!"), Henson feels a renewed faith in the company's current crop of performers. "I feel we are right back to the level that the Muppet team was at in the late '70s," he beams.

The goal of reinvigorating the divinely preposterous grandeur of Henson Company puppetry is a noble one, especially considering its philosophy. As Henson sees it: "If you discover things about yourself that you don't like, you can have one of two relationships with that: You can hide it, you can bury it, you can feel bad about it, feel guilty about it — or you can expose it, and laugh at it, and laugh out loud at yourself for being that way. And if you can do the latter, I think it's a very mature way of accepting yourself, and developing. It's almost like, the act of maturing is a very childish thing." ▼

See "Puppet Up! - Uncensored" at Avalon Hollywood on September 27th and October 25th. To purchase tickets, visit www.puppet-up.com. To learn more about "Sid the Science Kid" and the Jim Henson Company, visit www.henson.com.

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