

Punch and Judy

Glyn Edwards

Where to begin? Well, last year is as good a place as any. Punch and Judy were named in a newly launched multi-million pound government cultural initiative as being among the first ten official **Icons of England**. Whilst some media critics thought it absurd, others welcomed it enthusiastically and Mr. Punch was duly enshrined alongside Stonehenge, the FA Cup, the London red bus and the traditional ‘cup of tea’ as being something “*uniquely important to life in England and the people who live here and representing something in our culture, history or way of life*”. These fine words put no money into the pockets of the English puppeteers (known as ‘Professors’) who perform the traditional Punch and Judy Show – but it gave them a weapon of enormous power to use in their on-going skirmishes with the forces of Political Correctness who claim that it is a performance that encourages wife-beating, child abuse and all manner of other evils – and should thus be banned. At the same time it is also a puppet show regularly being performed at children’s birthday parties and at countless local festivities whilst simultaneously being scornfully dismissed by many practitioners of Puppet Theatre who would sooner cut off their own arms than have their work linked in the public mind with Mr. Punch’s antics. All these contradictions are at the heart of where the unruly puppet fits in to UK society. He is not part of the cultural establishment, he is a figure from popular culture – one who is truly ‘of the people’ - and it is they who have kept him alive down the centuries.

That the current government should choose to recognise this not only acknowledges Punch's astonishingly long career but is intended by them to send a signal that England's culture – like its population – comes from diverse nations: for Mr. Punch is, in fact, none other than Pulcinella from Naples who made his way across Europe to England many centuries ago. He is part of the same family of rogueish folk-puppets that boasts Petrushka, Polichinelle and Kasper. His more distant cousins are Spain's Don Cristobal and Portugal's Dom Roberto – and anyone who has seen a Punch and Judy Show and then discovers *mamulengo* will instantly recognise them as two parts of the same global tradition of mischief making hand-puppets, squabbling and brawling in public and providing a source of unbidden laughter and comment.

If you keep *mamulengo* in mind when reading of Punch's exploits below you will capture the flavour of the show. If (as in some cultures) you read what happens in the show without the understanding that it is played as comedy and not as tragedy then you will indeed wonder how on earth it is considered suitable entertainment for children. To some Americans today for instance (and the first recorded puppet in the USA was Mr. Punch) the whole concept of puppets hitting one another rather than acting cute and saying "I love you" is inexplicable. But that's another story and one that certainly gives American Punch Professors something to chew on. Meanwhile the two hundred or so 'Professors' in England can expect their telephones to ring all year round with enquiries ranging from a parent arranging a birthday party, a Shopping Centre wanting to book entertainment during the school holidays, a heritage attraction looking for a 'historical' entertainment or a pub organising a Family Fun Day. The list goes on: schools, museums, galleries, weddings, charity events, corporate entertainment agencies, municipal councils, seaside venues and tourist attractions all play their part in keeping Mr. Punch fully in work.

The standard plot of Punch and Judy involves the raucous, red nosed hunchback dancing with – or kissing – his shrewish wife Judy and then being left to look after their baby. The baby cries and Punch tries unsuccessfully to sing it to sleep before throwing it out of the window to get some peace. Judy returns with a stick and hits Punch. Punch and Judy fight and Punch knocks Judy down. A Policeman arrives to arrest Punch who hides. After a chase, Punch confronts the Policeman and knocks him down. Next – and in no particular order - Joey the Clown tries to play tricks on Punch, a Ghost comes to frighten Punch, a Doctor comes to administer medicine to Punch, and a crocodile comes to frighten Punch (lured by some sausages Joey the Clown brought into the plot). All these

characters – except Joey – are knocked down by Punch after a variety of chases and comic ‘routines’ (often including the famous ‘routine’ in which Mr. Punch tries to count the bodies that he has knocked down, whilst Joey the Clown keeps moving them around behind his back.) Eventually - and by now there may also have been a scene involving a puppet dog or monkey, a plate-spinning puppet, a comedy boxing match or a puppet with an extending neck – the plot reaches its conclusion and Punch faces his final foe. Some performers end with the so called ‘hanging scene’ in which Punch tricks the public executioner into hanging himself before saying good-bye to his audience; others end with the Devil coming to take Punch away and being knocked down just like all before him. And – regrettably – some performers end with the Policeman taking Mr. Punch to jail and making him apologise for all that he has done. What a let-down! If a public hanging ‘routine’ is no longer acceptable in a public puppet show – what better alternative than letting Punch defeat the Devil?

You will see from this synopsis that there is plenty of room for individual puppeteers to create their own version of the show – especially as there is no official script. The public expect to see Punch and Judy fight, they know something will happen to the baby and they are waiting to see a crocodile, a clown and a great deal of comic fun. Apart from that - and so long as it is performed in the manner of a Punch and Judy Show – the performer can use as few or as many of the puppets from the traditional repertoire as they wish and may tell it in whatever words they wish (using as many of the traditional pieces of dialogue and classic jokes they choose). The only requirement is that it is both fast and funny. A performer is also free to add their own new characters – maybe a topical puppet or a figure of authority to be mocked – but not if it alters the overall balance of the show. In recent years pop stars, soap opera stars and politicians from Margaret Thatcher to Tony Blair have made cameo appearances in various performances – following in a tradition that once saw Lord Nelson, Winston Churchill and Adolf Hitler held up to the public for their cheers or their fury. And as for the speed of the show – well, Mr. Punch is generally a large wooden hand-puppet rather than the smaller sized Pulcinella, Dom Roberto and *mamulengo* figures so whilst these smaller puppets move with the lightening speed of martial arts experts, Punch struts his stage like a heavy-weight boxer. Nevertheless – to borrow the boast of Muhammed Ali – he can float like a butterfly and sting like a bee and is as fast with his ‘slapstick’ as are any of his relatives with their own sticks.

But how did Punch get to be an official **Icon of England**? And where did his show come from? We need to travel back to the year 1662. In

England it is a new beginning after turbulent times. In the past decades the English have executed their King Charles 1, had a brief spell under a dictator whose religious puritanism outlawed all entertainments, and have then restored the monarchy under King Charles II. In 1662 this King is to be married and the entertainers of Europe are flocking to England to earn money from a fun-starved nation that is now riotously celebrating the wedding (to the Portuguese Catherine of Braganza) of a King who will become known to history as the Merry Monarch. One of these entertainers is Pietro Gimonde - also known as Signor Bologna - with his puppet show starring a certain 'Pollicinella'. We know this because the famous diarist, statesman and courtier Samuel Pepys recorded that in Covent Garden on May 9th 1662 – a couple of weeks before the Royal wedding – he came across “*an Italian puppet play....the best that I ever saw*”. The puppet became the talk of the town, played before the King himself, and started a public career that has lasted to this day – when May 9th is considered by puppeteers to be Mr. Punch's Official Birthday.

Gimonde had crossed Europe with his travelling show, stopping off at Munich, Frankfurt, Cologne, Vienna and Paris, and his star character was a puppet interpretation of the mask Pulcinella – one of the classic figures of the Italian *Commedia Dell' Arte* troupes of comic popular actors. The English – ever notorious for their inability to pronounce words from other languages – soon called him Punchinello: a name which was eventually shortened to Punch. Not that his show was yet the Punch and Judy Show that we know today. This puppet was a marionette controlled by a rod to the head rather than a hand puppet and, accompanied by live music, performed with the other puppets on an elaborate raised stage some six metres square.

So successful was this new puppet comedian that other showmen copied him and spread his name throughout the land. For the next hundred years or so Punch was a regular attraction on the great annual circuit of Fairs - the means by which goods, money and entertainment were circulated the length and breadth of England in the days before the rise of modern towns and cities. The travelling entertainers who performed at these Fairs did so inside booths or tents and here Punch was a star turn in a variety of puppet plays. George Speaight's classic work *Punch and Judy: A history* quotes Edward Popham, writing in the 1700s, to give us a vivid glimpse of what you would see if you could travel back in time to sit in the audience “*a little man advances with a ridiculous face, a humpback and a vast belly; Punch is his name, and there is none more impudent; he is always intruding into serious scenes, putting everything in disorder with his chattering and his jokes. Often,*

turning towards a tightly packed bench of girls he sits himself down near to them; My beautiful ones, he says, winking roguishly, her's a friend come to join you! His double-meanings, hinting at gross indecencies, bring a blush to every modest cheek and broad smiles to the rows of men and boys". He didn't yet have a wife called Judy – although he was hen-pecked by one called Joan with whom he quarrelled incessantly and who, in one famous illustration, is shown being pushed in a wheelbarrow by her roguish husband.

So why and when did he transform into the hand puppet Mr. Punch, find a wife called Judy and take to the streets in a show that is still a basis for Punch and Judy Shows to this day? These topics provide the liveliest ground for debate amongst the academics and historians of his career. Punch became a hand puppet towards the end of the 1700s but historians differ as to whether this was because the declining Fairground circuit no longer brought enough custom to support large puppet companies or whether it was because the dramatic rise of modern towns and cities suddenly created places of opportunity for a new kind of smaller urban street performance. A third theory (which doesn't exclude either of the other two) suggests that a Pulcinella hand puppet performer from Italy visited London around this time and sparked this major change the Punch tradition. For whatever reason, Mr. Punch suddenly found fresh impetus and became the talk of the town all over again.

This is the time when the elements of the classic Punch and Judy Show format are first put in place. The bulky marionette stage is replaced by a small and easily portable one. The large company of puppeteers is replaced by a solo performer. The marionettes – so good at jumping, dancing and capering with comic grace – are replaced by hand puppets who excel at high speed knockabout as the solo puppeteer pits right hand against left. And because the style of puppet determines the nature of the performance the characters are no longer stringed mannikins aping human form and gesture. Instead they are grotesque comic caricatures stripped down to their bare essentials - and their little show holds up a mocking fairground mirror to the world around them.

It is an era of great social upheaval when the working class created by the new era of factories and mass production are being kept in their place by the weighty apparatus of the State, the Law and the Church. Public execution is the penalty handed down for countless crimes, marriage is the institution intended to bind society together and Hell is the place that awaits the transgressors. What better entertainment for the teeming crowds on the streets than to see it all gloriously turned upside down and mocked by a big-nosed, hump-backed little comedian and his fellow

puppets? The crowd knows they can't dissolve the marriage bond with a blow, despatch the forces of law and order in the same manner and then – after tricking the hangman into hanging himself – go on to defeat the Devil himself. But they can watch Mr. Punch do it, laugh themselves hoarse, and feel all the better for it. This is at the heart of the Punch and Judy Show's appeal – and the true key to keeping it alive today. Mr. Punch is on the side of the people and against those who would keep them in their place. His squawking mockery still echoes in places of power for British political cartoonists regularly use Punch and Judy as an image when they want to draw politicians in a childish squabble. The current leader of the opposition party in Parliament recently made an appeal to his followers by promising “an end to Punch and Judy politics” and thereby guaranteeing a laugh from the watching adults for any performer who makes a reference to “Punch and Judy politics” in a contemporary Punch show.

As Britain entered the 1800s out went Joan and in came Judy (perhaps because the audience began to mis-hear the name since “Joaney” and “Judy” sound much the same when spoken through the swazzle and a Judy was a popular term of the time meaning ‘a woman’). In came (briefly) Pretty Polly as Mr. Punch's girl-friend – a *femme fatale* borrowed from the cast of *The Beggar's Opera* on the London stage. In came Joey the Clown, named for the father of British clowning, the immortal Joey Grimaldi who is the box-office star of the era at the great London pantomime entertainments. And – because hand puppets are adept at holding things – in came Mr. Punch's slapstick: a scaled down version of the magic weapon of Harlequin from the ‘Harlequinades’: the short sequence of comic scenes which also a feature of the London stage – and descended – just like Punch – from the old *Commedia Dell' Arte* characters. Also borrowed from these entertainments was the comic scene where a doll (which has been substituted at the last minute for a live baby) is thrown out and about into the audience as part of the plot. Fronted by a live musician playing the pipe and drum outside the booth and acting as the show's Master of Ceremonies (and collector of the audience's pennies) the chief ingredients were all present for a what the Victorian Punch performer interviewed by sociologist Henry Mayhew in the 1840s called “one of the greatest novelties in the world”.

The show was hugely popular and continued adding elements from other entertainments of the times. This is when Punch performances started including comic boxing matches between puppets to parody the fairground boxing-booths of the time; or introducing chinese puppets to perform plate-spinning and chair-balancing; or adding a black-faced minstrel in tribute to that popular craze – or a performing dog (called Toby). The end result

was not so much a folk-play but a cabaret-like entertainment drawing on all manner of popular themes and presided over the great Lord of Misrule himself: Punch, whose outrageous actions and the ever failing attempts to catch him were a loose story-line upon which everything else was hung.

If you ask someone in England where they'd expect to find a Punch and Judy Show the answer will probably be "at the seaside" for this is where the show spent the best part of a hundred years. From the invention of seaside excursions by rail in the mid 1800s right through to the middle of the following century Mr. Punch was a popular entertainment on the beaches of England, along with donkey rides, pierrot shows and all manner of similar frivolities. New legislation had given the urban working masses paid holidays, and railway travel let them spend it away from towns. With thousands of fun-seekers available throughout the summer, Punch and Judy performers took their shows to the people. This extended spell in holiday mood, coupled with lucrative bookings as a treat for the young, mellowed the show into one suitable for family audiences and began the trend towards being primarily an entertainment for children. But the seaside is the place where Punch still abides in the national memory despite the fact that he's not really been there since the English started taking their holidays overseas a good many years ago. A tiny handful of seaside shows still exist – but mainly Punch works back in the towns these days.

The media sometimes assume that Punch and Judy is dying out because it's no longer at the seaside – whereas in reality it is the English seaside holiday tradition that has declined whilst Mr. Punch has moved on to earn his money elsewhere. He doesn't have to collect money by passing around the hat any more either. Nowadays he is a paid attraction earning a decent day's wage. Currently a good Punch performer can command for a day's work the same fee that an actor on minimum wage would earn for a week's work. Popular though Mr. Punch is, not everyone loves him: he is far too controversial for that. But although he has always had his detractors, his friends have always significantly outnumbered his opponents. Novelist Charles Dickens, upon receiving a letter from a lady hoping to enlist his support in suppressing Punch as a corruptor of youth wrote back with defence of the show which is still quoted by Professors today. Dickens - who was a fan of Mr. Punch and referred to him in several of his works – replied

"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 in its influence 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 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 of suffering”.

A few years earlier the Victorian showman interviewed by Henry Mayhew said of his more genteel clients *“I am obliged to perform very steady, very slow; they won't have no ghost, no coffin and no devil. And that's what I call spoiling the performance... It's the march of intellect that's doing all this: it is sir!”*

Today similar arguments would be clothed in the jargon of Political Correctness, but those arguing against Punch have no more success than was the case a hundred and fifty years ago and are usually viewed as humourless fundamentalists. They get little public sympathy for complaining about an age-old puppet show. Nevertheless, Punch Professors have to keep the show broadly in tune with the times and that is partly what keeps the tradition alive. Mr. Punch overturns the rules of society – but in order to do that he has to know exactly what those rules are.

When Political Correctness entered the mainstream in the 1970s it was conceivable that Mr. Punch's time might finally be up. Within a few years performing animals were no longer culturally acceptable thus bringing an end to performing poodles and lion tamers alike. Meanwhile the BBC finally brought down the curtain on its long running ‘Black and White Minstrel Show’ as this form of entertainment was now seen as deeply offensive and racist. Mr. Punch thus had to say goodbye to a live Dog Toby and to part company with the minstrel Jim Crow – who had been there since the original entertainer using that name had been a star. Punch certainly dropped out of favour with school teachers who now shunned booking him for the summer or Christmas treat. He was under suspicion of being (to use that wonderful mealy-mouthed term) “inappropriate”. But Punch Professors – acting through the two Punch organisations which by now had sprung up – fought back gleefully with a barrage of arguments pouring scorn on their opponents. “Punch and Judy no more promotes domestic violence than Goldilocks and the Three Bears promotes squatting” was the first of many slogans which (along with the still relevant views of Charles Dickens) were picked up and re-published by the media who relished the story and who universally endorsed Mr. Punch. As the last decades of the 20th Century ticked by the battle continued, with no snub to Mr. Punch being ignored and left without a counter-attack. With the

arrival of the internet and the posting of dedicated media pages on the websites of the Punch organisations the information war was won and the tide of battle began to ebb until it returned to being the little skirmish it had always been. The dawn of the new century saw Punch and Judy Shows officially part of the government's Millennium Dome celebratory showpiece in London and the star of his own Punch and Judy Jamboree in Birmingham. In 2001 the Queen's Golden Jubilee saw Punch welcome at countless local celebrations. In 2002 a set of Punch and Judy stamps was issued. In 2004 Punch performer John Styles was awarded the MBE – a prestigious medal within the British honours system. In 2005 Punch and Judy was officially classified by the Government as an Icon of England and some Punch Professors were awarded money by the Arts Council of England to fund a cult theatre maverick to write some scenes for a Punch and Judy project aimed at updating the show for adults only. In 2006 The Punch and Judy College of Professors (a Punch organisation based on the model of the prestigious magical society the Inner Magic Circle) teamed up with Royal Holloway College, University of London in order for a graduate student to write their doctoral thesis on Contemporary Punch and Judy in Performance and so bring Mr. Punch's history up to date.

By now a new generation had grown up who saw Mr. Punch through the lens of post-modern irony. He was so knowingly outrageous that to take him seriously would itself be a joke. And if you started describing a show that featured a bizarre family in a surreal story where visual comedy played a key part along with a sideways look at contemporary society you might find that, actually, you were describing *The Simpsons*. Animated TV series are now working in a tradition once the province of the humble hand-puppet and some of them portray far more controversial activity than Mr. Punch is ever accused of. Meanwhile the seaside amusement arcades in the resorts where Punch once held sway are now filled with shoot-em-up video games far more graphic than any fights with a little wooden slapstick. Pointing this out to Punch's detractors – and reminding them that Mr. Punch defeats the Devil – ensures that only the die-hard Politically Correct fundamentalists are left. And they've always had more criticism in the British media than has Mr. Punch. That's not to say all is completely well with the tradition. Children's entertainment is a lucrative market in England and face-painters, balloon modellers, clowns and magicians (both amateur and professional) are in every Yellow Pages. Any of these may well decide to take up Punch and Judy, buy some puppets, start advertising their services and, because Mr. Punch is famous, it will bring them work. Thus the standard of shows varies enormously depending on the level of intelligence,

understanding of the tradition and skill shown by the performer. Some shows are toe-curlingly dreadful and deserve all the criticism heaped upon them. Others are superb and performed by puppeteers of world-class skill. To the general public, however, a Punch and Judy Show is a Punch and Judy Show – and so a poor one reflects badly upon the whole tradition. This is unfortunate because in truth a poor puppet show doesn't reflect badly on the whole art form: it just reflects badly on the particular puppeteer or puppet company. Mr. Punch is an iconic figure, however, and needs to be seen at his best at all times so as to keep up his reputation. Thus the Punch and Judy organisations continue their work to ensure that the tradition keeps up to date, attracts new performers of quality, is showcased at prestigious events and is strengthened in those few areas of the country where for miscellaneous reasons the tradition has been seen less in recent years. So far the first few years of a new Millennium have seen Punch in fine fettle and raring to go. It will be up to subsequent generations to carry the baton on through the next century of his career.

Glyn Edwards is the author of 'Successful Punch & Judy' the modern standard handbook teaching the traditional skills of the show. He has been a Punch Professor for 45 years and has taught Punch skills in the UK, in Italy and the USA.