

The Jim Henson Company's

Puppet Up!

Uncensored



Puppets for grownups... By Andrew Seccombe

“Well I've been told that I look like 'Beaker'. With the shock of red hair on top, the weird frown and excited eyes. When I was skinnier I actually did look a lot like him. Whether I'd like to be or not, I think I am Beaker...”

Patrick Bristow is coming to terms with his puppet alter ego. In fact the 44 year old comedian, best known for his role as Ellen DeGeneres' gay best friend on the TV show *Ellen*, has been spending a lot of time with puppets of late. He's the host of the upcoming *Puppet Up! - Uncensored* show which is part of this year's Big Laugh Comedy Festival. The completely improvised comedy show involves nine puppeteers, as well, dare I say, as a handful of Jim Henson studio puppets, with Bristow at the helm. The content of each show is entirely dependent on audience participation and Patrick is revelling in his role.

“Basically I get audience suggestions for each of the improvised sketches that the puppeteers will perform,” says Patrick. “It's really a blast. Everything we do is completely improvised. We don't take suggestions that we've had before and every show is unique. I'm kind of the conduit between the audience and the puppets...”

Australian audiences will be free to suggest whatever material they like during the shows, with politics, sex and global culture all available strictly for the purposes of comedy. Yet Patrick explains that the 'adults only' nature of the show is mainly to free up the creativity of the audience and the performers, rather than the show aiming particularly at sexual or lewd content.

“Certainly a portion of the show goes there - just by the fact that we have an adult audience who are enjoying putting out suggestions and seeing them spun into instant comedy sketches,” Patrick explains. But he goes on to comment that many of their improv structures aren't at all sexually orientated, which audiences find equally amusing. “We try to balance it,” he says. “If the show was blue from beginning to end, that would get very tiresome.”

Patrick has made many appearances in both TV and film with his credits including *Curb Your Enthusiasm*, *Seinfeld*, *Friends* and *Austin Powers: International Man of Mystery*. It was his involvement with Los Angeles based improv group 'The Groundlings' however, (which has helped launch the careers of Will Ferrell and Lisa Kudrow) that saw Patrick connected to the world of Jim Henson. He explains that he was hired by the Henson Company to teach a weekly improv workshop to puppeteers. Patrick and the group then decided to do an informal show together at the HBO Comedy Festival in Aspen, which in turn was seen by representatives of the Edinburgh Arts Festival, which then led to the team playing more than fifty shows thus far in various corners of the globe.

Different audiences bring different attitudes and Patrick has been enjoying the alternating challenges which are presented on a nightly basis. “The LA audiences liked to try and stump us,” he explains. “They're very improv savvy. And of course they didn't stump us - which made them all the more appreciative. The audiences in Aspen were very curious and almost respectful in the beginning and then they got on board with it. But they were analysing because they were in the industry. In Scotland it seemed that they enjoyed two things thematically: one was when we tried to incorporate aspects of their culture into our improvs and either we got it right or we totally screwed it up. They also liked when we poked fun at American culture which, you may know, we have a lot to poke fun at.”

Patrick admits the audience gets a kick out of him and the puppets “bs-ing” their way through shows, explaining that the group are “equal opportunity offenders” that aren't bound by any political correctness. But he also explains what a difficult format it is. “The improvised sketch format is very hard,” he says. “Unlike a lot of longform improv, you have to hit a home run in 2 to 3 minutes and just as you might be getting your sea legs...we start a new one. There's no safety net.”

And the puppets themselves? Well, they're a varied bunch apparently. There's a bunch of hot dogs, a stone tiki called Poonu and

a diaper-wearing dog called Piddles, and Patrick says they've all become like children to him. He explains that for each sketch, the puppeteers will grab any one of their puppets, and along with the audience, he'll provide a context for the onstage interactions. “I'll say 'Okay, these three are in a support group for some unusual problem like they bite their nails too much or they will only go outside in even months,’” Patrick explains. “Those three will have to be relating and telling their stories as though there's nothing unusual about a hot dog, a dog and a tiki god just hanging out with common problems. There's a lot of anarchy - it's definitely that old school Jim Henson-style lunacy.”

The lunacy seems to exist as much offstage as it does on, as Patrick explains that even the puppets are caught up in the trappings of fame, with their high-flying

entertainment lifestyle. I ask Patrick whether any of them are particularly fond of a night out on the town, or if they may have a weakness for party drugs or alcohol.

“Well I can't mention names because anonymity is the cornerstone to recovery,” Patrick replies. “There have been a couple of puppets that we've had to try and do interventions on but the worry is when they're in transit. We ship them out in these boxes, they fly ahead of us and they go through customs. When the boxes are opened though, they've found little bottles of tequila. And the puppets aren't telling us which one was hitting the sauce. They're sneaky.”

Despite these understandable challenges of a travelling comedy group, Patrick has full faith in the humour and smarts of his felt friends, as they've been proving their appeal to audiences everywhere. So is it therefore possible that puppets may one day change the world?

“They've changed my world,” Patrick replies. “And every journey starts with one step. So we're hoping to spread it like a virus and infect everyone with puppet-improv mania. Someone's got to fix the world. Apparently the humans haven't been doing it, so let's try the puppets!”



Who: The Jim Henson Company's *Puppet Up! - Uncensored*
When/ Where: March 22 at Riverside Theatres, Parramatta
March 23 -31 at the State Theatre