

INTRODUCTION

“Quality television programming can open wide the windows of curiosity for children and enable them to share in the wonder of man’s experience.”

— Ronald Reagan, October 13, 1986

IN THE SPRING of 1986, Saturday morning children’s television was popular, profitable, and predictable. The three major television networks, ABC, CBS, and NBC, aired cartoons that lacked in originality and, for the most part, had no educational value. There were superheroes (*Spider-Man and His Amazing Friends*, *The Super Powers Team: Galactic Guardians*), animated adaptations of live-action movies and TV shows (*It’s Punky Brewster*, *Star Wars*), new shows with established characters (*Alvin and the Chipmunks*, *The Smurfs*), and even a show starring a larger-than-life wrestling personality (*Hulk Hogan’s Rock ‘n’ Wrestling*).

As children urged their parents to empty their wallets for toys based on their favorite Saturday morning cartoons, some parents began paying closer attention to children’s programming, and many didn’t like what they saw. Critics described the networks’ lineups as being filled with “program-length commercials” for merchandising



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like Pound Puppies, G.I. Joe, and Care Bears. Peggy Charren, the founder and president of Action for Children's Television, claimed that Saturday morning TV was "filled with do-goody nonsense" and she urged networks to introduce shows with more educational value. With the scrutiny of children's television increasing, President Ronald Reagan established National Children's Television Awareness Week that October, a month after the new season of Saturday morning programming debuted. Television as we knew it would be forever changed.

Into the Saturday morning television war zone stepped Pee-wee Herman, the man-child in a too-small gray suit of armor, a soldier of a new era of creative children's programming. While *Pee-wee's Playhouse* was hardly the first show to blend animation, puppetry, and live-action — PBS's *Sesame Street* had crossed that bridge almost 20 years earlier — it added a subversive, hipster sensibility to the format, providing a gust of fresh air to a tired timeslot reserved for the stale ideas of network execs.

Playhouse's impact was immediate. The *Washington Post* described the program as "utterly magical, beautifully realized, and veritably giddy with plaintive charm." The show gained the respect of parent advocacy groups and critics alike for being the lone Saturday morning children's show that was not completely animated. In the weeks following its debut, *Playhouse* was frequently cited as being not only the best new show of the season, but the best program on Saturday morning, period.

As William S. Burroughs once said, "In the magical universe there are no coincidences and there are no accidents." This was certainly true for *Playhouse*. The show not only provided a generation of children with something wildly entertaining to watch as they ate their sugared cereal, but it also became symbolic of a national changing of the guard. Just as cassette players had replaced turntables, the new and inventive consumed the old and traditional. Video killed the radio star. *Pee-wee's Playhouse* killed *The Smurfs*.

In fact, it was the popularization of a new and inventive technology that introduced me to Pee-wee Herman. In 1985, my grandpa purchased his first VCR and began taping everything he was remotely interested in that aired on pay-cable networks. By 1986, the surprise success of the film *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* ensured that it would be placed in heavy rotation on HBO, often coupled with 1981's *The Pee-wee Herman Show* special, which had regained attention as Pee-wee became a household name. My grandpa would sit down with me, before I could even form complete sentences, to watch Pee-wee double features. My parents were aware of my interest and they turned the television to *Pee-wee's Playhouse* on Saturday mornings. I watched religiously, often screaming the secret word at the top of my lungs whenever it flashed on the screen and jumping up and down in my footed pajamas. I owned the pull-string doll,

which now sounds more like one of the Chipmunks, and it traveled with me to family gatherings, on long car rides, to birthday parties, and everywhere else my parents would let me carry it. One of my cousins had a few episodes on tape that I begged her to watch with me whenever I went over to visit. There are home movies of me imitating Pee-wee's laugh and obnoxiously asking my family the quintessential rhetorical question, "I know you are, but what am I?"

When I started working on this book, I believed myself to be the biggest Pee-wee fan around. However, during the two years I spent working on this project, I found thousands of fans all over the world who have kept their love for Pee-wee alive. Birgit Schuetze, a fan from Germany, spent close to \$3,000 to fly to the States to see Pee-wee Herman on Broadway last year. Perry



© Ken Sax

Shall of Philadelphia has a full-sleeve tattoo of the *Playhouse* characters on his arm, with a large illustration of Jambi the Genie on his chest. Ben Zurawski of Chicago, an artist who makes replicas of *Playhouse* characters, coordinated with the producers of the recent stage show at Club Nokia in Los Angeles to propose to his girlfriend Summer Violett, also a fan, on the *Playhouse* set.



© Birgit Schuetze

Fans Birgit Schuetze and Kevin Buell
at *The Pee-wee Herman Show*

Fans like Birgit, Perry, Ben, and Summer are not alone. There has been overwhelming support for Pee-wee on social networking sites, with over half a million people linked with him on Twitter alone. Thousands of fans have shown up to see Paul Reubens, the man behind Pee-wee's make up, at public appearances throughout the years with requests for him to sign 15-year-old merchandise and say some of Pee-wee's signature lines. These are the fans who caused Cartoon Network's Adult Swim reruns of *Playhouse* to average nearly 1.5 million viewers a night in 2004, and who have defended Reubens throughout his various personal and professional struggles.

Over the last two years I reached out to over 200 people affiliated with the show — including Reubens himself, but I was informed that he was reserving his memories for a future memoir. As I told his manager, when his book comes out, I will be among the first to preorder a copy. Reubens' reflections of creating what *TV Guide* called one of the top 10 cult classics of all time will undoubtedly be worth reading. However, in speaking to others involved in the show's creation, I realized that there are hundreds of other stories that can be told about bringing *Pee-wee's Playhouse* to the screen. What I found most striking during the interviewing process was the pride and affection that everyone I spoke to felt for the show and for their own accomplishments, despite some of their personal feelings about Reubens and problems behind the scenes. Twenty-five years later, many of the show's crew described *Playhouse* as



© Perry Shall

Perry Shall's ode to the *Playhouse*

the best job they'd ever had. The show's lasting success is due to the contributions of a number of talented individuals, many of whom allowed their stories to be told in these pages.

My goal with this book is to trace how a show that must have sounded bizarre on paper managed to captivate the public's attention throughout the '80s. Every once in a while something comes along that becomes a dominating force in our society, often without reasonable explanation. For five years, *Pee-wee's Playhouse* was it. Off camera, there were personal and professional complications that weighed on the production, yet the end result was often pitch perfect. The exact reasons for the show's success and its lasting impact on our culture are difficult to define, but my hope is that this book will help readers form their own hypotheses.



© Ben Zurawski

Playhouse fans Ben Zurawski and Summer Violett, a year after their engagement

This book is for loyal fans of *Pee-wee's Playhouse* who watched every Saturday morning, as well as for those who always secretly wanted to know what the fuss was all about. This book is for parents who have introduced their children to the show, as well as for teenagers who have recently discovered the show on reruns and DVD. This book is for girls who wanted to be Miss Yvonne and boys who substituted their mothers' heels for Pee-wee's platform shoes when dancing along to "Tequila." Most importantly, this book is for the hundreds of people who worked tirelessly behind the scenes to contribute to a pop culture phenomenon and the millions of fans around the world, like myself, who always wanted to take a look inside Pee-wee's playhouse.



© Angela De Gregorio

Caseen Gaines with Prudence Fenton, animation and effects producer for *Pee-wee's Playhouse*

© Johanna Calle

Caseen Gaines with John Paragon and Lynne Stewart



© Angela De Gregorio

Caseen Gaines with Phil LaMarr



Courtesy Asolo Repertory Theatre

A promotional still of 17-year-old Paul Rubinfeld in Asolo Repertory Theatre's 1970 production of *Life With Father* alongside Isa Thomas, Robert Britton, and William Pitts.