

HOUSE of FUN

Pee-wee's Playhouse enchanted kids and adults alike with its sense of childish delight

ONE NIGHT IN the late 1970s, actor Paul Reubens was confronted with a challenge onstage with the Los Angeles improv group the Groundlings: to create the persona of the world's worst standup comedian. "I decided I would be the type of comic who you would look at and know he would never make it," Reubens remembers.

The character, whom he named "Pee-wee" after a brand of harmonica, came together from many sources: a small, gray suit was given by the group's director Gary Austin, and a black bow tie from another friend. Even Pee-wee Herman's voice was something Reubens borrowed—from himself. Having just done the play *Life with Father* in Sarasota, Fla., the actor remembers, "I had unwittingly over the course of three months turned my character into a kind of cartoon. By the end, I had developed this very cartoony voice."

I KNOW YOU ARE, BUT WHAT AM I?

A few years later, in the early 1980s, Reubens had the opportunity to audition for the changing cast of *Saturday Night Live*—and didn't get the gig. Initially "panicked" by the rejection, Reubens remembers that he eventually "decided to produce my own show, and try to see what I could make happen on my own." With \$7,500 borrowed from his parents, the actor teamed with fellow Groundlings John Paragon, Lynne Marie Stewart and Phil Hartman to put a production on stage—first at the Groundlings theater, and later at the hip Roxy nightclub, where midnight shows of *The Pee-wee Herman Show* ran for five months and attracted the hippest in Hollywood.

ON A ROLL:
Pee-wee's Playhouse aired from 1986 to 1991 on CBS.





ON SET: Paul Reubens in character as Pee-wee.

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— PAUL REUBENS

In the show, which was eventually filmed for a now-famous HBO special, Reubens and his fellow writers gave Pee-wee some context, turning the brattish man-child into the host of a children’s program. “There was so much stuff on Saturday morning when I was a kid, like *The Mickey Mouse Club*, *Captain Kangaroo* and *Sky King*,” Reubens explains. And he was particularly influenced by a show that, for those in the know, can be viewed on more than one level. “When I got a little older, and saw *Rocky and Bullwinkle* as an adult, I was amazed by how much stuff I had missed as a kid that I didn’t understand.”

SO FUNNY, WE DIDN’T FORGET TO LAUGH

Pee-wee’s path soon led from the stage to the big screen. And at the premiere party for the film *Pee-wee’s Big Adventure* in 1985, the actor was approached by CBS executive Judy Price to do a Saturday morning cartoon. Reubens countered with another idea: Rather than create an animated Pee-wee, he would do his stage show for the network, with live action. “I immediately thought back to all this incredible stuff that was on TV when I was a kid that then wasn’t represented at all,” he explains.

With an offer of creative carte blanche from CBS, Reubens recruited top artists to fulfill his vision for *Pee-wee’s Playhouse*, a colorful world populated by people and puppets alike. The show’s art director,



BAD BOYS:
Pee-wee
with Billy
Bologna.

Gary Panter, created what Stewart calls “an edgy, punk, of-the-moment look that perfectly suited Pee-wee’s kinetic energy.” Pee-wee’s favorite stuffed chair? A puppet named Chairry. Ptery, a friendly pterodactyl, would drop in from time to time from the ceiling. And Conky the Robot would zoom past the zigzag edges of the Playhouse’s red, tufted front door as he delivered the episode’s “secret word,” the mere mention of which required the kid-die audience to scream with delight.

**IF YOU LOVE IT SO MUCH,
WHY DON'T YOU MARRY IT?**

While *Pee-wee’s Playhouse* was ostensibly aimed at kids, there was something subversive about it, too. Just like some of Reubens’ own adolescent favorites, the show played on a second, deeper level and attracted particular ardor on college campuses and in niche audiences like the gay community.

Now, at age 58, Reubens recounts having “talked to people over the years who had been watching, lots of whom were hung-over college kids.” But three decades after inventing his iconic alter ego and nearly two since *Playhouse* last aired on CBS, the actor is reluctant to examine the Pee-wee phenomenon too closely. “The moment I really answer any [serious] questions about what it all means, all the fun is out of it for me. And I fear that I won’t be able to do it anymore once I understand it too much.”

Or as Pee-wee might say, “Take a picture. It’ll last longer!” — *Jim Colucci*

WHAT A CHARACTER!

In casting actual humans to walk amid the friendly chaos of *Pee-wee’s Playhouse*, Paul Reubens was careful to reflect ethnic and gender diversity. He was also particularly adept at spotting talent—especially with actors who would go on to huge careers. — *Jim Colucci*

S. EPATHA MERKERSON (REBA THE MAIL LADY):

Merkerson already had made a name for herself as a dramatic stage actress, and afterward would go on to play the longest-running black character in prime time as *Law & Order’s* Lt. Anita Van Buren. But in between, Merkerson was game to put a little of *Pee-wee’s* silliness on her résumé.

When she got the role, “I called home and my nephew happened to answer my mother’s phone,” she says. “I told him I’d gotten a job on a children’s show, and when he asked ‘Who is it?’ I said, ‘This character named ... Pee-wee Herman?’ And he just started screaming.”



LYNNE MARIE STEWART (MISS YVONNE): Reubens was very specific about what he wanted Miss Yvonne to look like: “a prom queen,” remembers Lynne Marie Stewart. Stewart, now 63 and appearing in a recurring role on the FX sitcom *It’s Always Sunny in Philadelphia*, has fond memories of wearing Miss Yvonne’s giant wig. “I was already 40 when I played Miss Yvonne, and I’d go to work in a muumuu or sweat clothes and no one on the crew would pay any attention to me. But the moment I got in Miss Yvonne drag, they would flock to help me walk up stairs and get around. They’d always hold out their hand to me.”

LAURENCE FISHBURNE (COWBOY CURTIS):

Then known as Larry Fishburne, the young actor was already gaining fame from such films as *Apocalypse Now* when he auditioned for *Playhouse*. “I came in, duded up in gray suede cowboy gear and with a bald head, because I had just done a military picture,” remembers Fishburne, now starring on *CSI: Crime Scene Investigation*. “I played it at first very dark and stoic, macho and ramrod-straight. And they just looked at me and said, ‘Um ... can you make it lighter?’” Ultimately bedecked in a long wig, pink jeans and lavender chaps, “I was very different from Yul Brynner,” the actor says with a laugh, but “it was an opportunity to do something completely silly.”



JOHN PARAGON (JAMBI THE GENIE): After *Playhouse*, Paragon starred in his own Showtime comedy special and appeared in the cult movies *Eating Raoul*, *Echo Park* and *UHF*. On television, he made guest appearances on *Cheers* and *Star Trek: Deep Space Nine*, and had a recurring role on *Seinfeld*. Paragon received five Emmy nominations for writing and co-directing *Playhouse*. Now 55, the actor/writer/director, who is also a creative consultant for Walt Disney Imagineering, is spending the fall of 2010 again in full makeup, his green head once more inhabiting Jambai’s famous teeny box.

PHIL HARTMAN (CAPTAIN CARL):

“All the shows that I was influenced by had either a pretty woman host, or there were a couple in Florida that had sea captains,” Reubens remembers. “So when I was talking to Phil Hartman about my new show, he wanted to be a sea captain. We came up with the name Captain Carl, and the show was born right that minute.” At the same time as his role in *Playhouse*, Hartman starred for years on *Saturday Night Live*. He was appearing on both NBC’s sitcom *NewsRadio* and in a recurring role on *The Simpsons* at the time of his death in 1998, at age 49.

