

'Puppets gone wild' at Dad's Garage on Oct. 10

7:00 am October 9, 2009, by Jamie Gumbrecht

It came to my attention yesterday that a very fine story involving puppets and booze was printed in our paper, but didn't make it onto our Web site. I can't let that happen.

You see, there's a puppet slam going on at Dad's Garage this weekend. I'll not attempt to explain, but I will post the story. Go ahead and read — "No children allowed! It's puppets gone wild," by Jill Vejnaska:

The first rule of Puppet "Fight Club" is there are no rules.



Foolio. Photo by Lucky Yates

It's no place for the faint of heart, in other words.

"My recommendation would be to have fun," said Scott Warren, producer at [Dad's Garage Theatre Company](#) in Inman Park. "And to wear clothes you don't care about."

The next meeting comes to disorder Saturday night when Dad's Garage — the 15-year-old scripted and improv comedy institution known for working puppets into many of its shows — opens its doors for what's officially known as a Puppet Slam. Unofficially, it's anyone's guess what could happen when about a dozen invited puppeteers, whose day jobs range from performing in kids' shows to making costumes for movie monsters and college mascots, descend upon a tiny upstairs theater at Dad's and spend five to seven minutes apiece just throwing stuff out there.

And no, that's not necessarily a metaphor.

"I'm prone myself to spraying liquids around the stage during slams," chuckled Chris Brown, 43, of Kirkwood. The veteran creature builder created all the puppets for last year's charming "Sam the Lovesick Snowman" show at the [Center for Puppetry Arts](#) and just finished making a Bigfoot suit for an upcoming feature film.

Yet for all his experience, he's never quite sure what he'll see at one of the several-times-a-year slams. "Sometimes, people take a few days to put a show together. Sometimes, they just drink some bourbon, crawl out on stage and put some crazy crap out there. Absurd fun is the best way to describe it."

The title of Brown's first slam piece a few years ago: "Hamlet the Talking Severed Horse Head."

Somewhere, Punch and Judy are blushing.

Or feeling hopelessly unhappenin' and left out . . .

Like a warehouse rave or one of those outlaw cool parties the shop kids were always rumored to be throwing in high school, Dad's puppet slams exist slightly under the radar. They happen infrequently (the next one is in December) — although the "right" people always seem to know when and where to show up.

They start at midnight.

Children are banned, drinking strongly encouraged.

Puppets hook up. They get beat up. Occasionally, something blows up.

"I had a guy burn his eyebrows off," cackled slam organizer Lucky Yates, remembering a Christmas-themed slam act, of all things. "It was hilarious."

Tough room.

"It's like a slightly more public version of 'Fight Club,' " Warren joked.

That 1999 cult classic movie starred Brad Pitt as the creepy, yet charismatic leader of a network of underground brawlers forced to adhere to a set of rules like, "You do not talk about Fight Club."

The slam's star — such as it is — is Foolio, the maniacally grinning, fez-wearing puppet extension of Yates, the director of puppetry at Dad's.

Better known as a PG-rated puppet — he's part of the much-loved, Saturday morning "Uncle Grampa's Hoo-Dilly Storytime" show — Foolio "works a little more blue" as host of the slams, said Yates. Even when he's not having his nose snapped off, as occurred during one slam, he's attempting to ride herd over the felt-bodied, pingpong-ball-eyed version of "Girls Gone Wild."



Brown and Crackrabbit.
Photo by Daniel Fox.

Yates organized the first slam back in 2000 and has been gently pulling the strings ever since. There's much to pull from. Puppeting opportunity runs deep here, thanks to Atlanta's lively theater community and the presence of the internationally known Center for Puppetry Arts in Midtown. And for all the Center's adult-oriented offerings — including "The Ghastly Dreadfuls II," opening Oct. 15 with a "live tweet" and jazz music event being held in conjunction with WCLK radio — the audiences for non-slam puppet shows are overwhelmingly young.

They probably wouldn't appreciate the inspired lunacy of, say, Beau Brown's "Crackrabbit and Ham in Space vs. the Space Amazons." Or the "Gloomy Pages," an occasional slam feature where Scott Warren inserts classic comic strip characters into depressing situations (once, Charlie Brown killed himself because Lucy's psychiatric service was so bad).

"The slam is an opportunity for puppeteers to put on shows without any amount of censorship, which is extremely difficult to do in an art form as focused as ours is on children," said Beau Brown. "There's no, 'Let me see your show, your script ahead of time.' I just show up with my box of puppets and I go."

Yates contacts puppeteers around town about a month ahead of time and plants the slam bug in their fertile brains. Then, in the case of acts with specific technical needs, he essentially leaves them alone until a few days before the show. For everyone else, a few hours warning is all that's needed.

"I put together a show order about 10 minutes before the doors open," said Yates. "I know the puppeteers pretty well, but they'll tell me this one will be a comedy, or this one has someone's head exploding. If there's lots of gore and goo, you have to put it at the end of the evening so the others don't slip in it."

Meanwhile, the people who literally have a hand in things seem to pride themselves on leaving as much as possible until the last minute.

"It's more fun that way," said Jason von Hinezmeyer, resident puppet builder at the Center for Puppetry Arts.

Want to go? Puppet Slam. 11:59 p.m. Saturday. \$7 in advance, \$9 at the door. Dad's Garage, 280 Elizabeth Street, Suite C-101, Atlanta. 404-523-3141 ext. 201, www.dadsgarage.com.