

# *the* **FUNNY PAPER**

For kid show and family entertainers

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**Steve  
Axtell**  
Expressions  
of Creativity

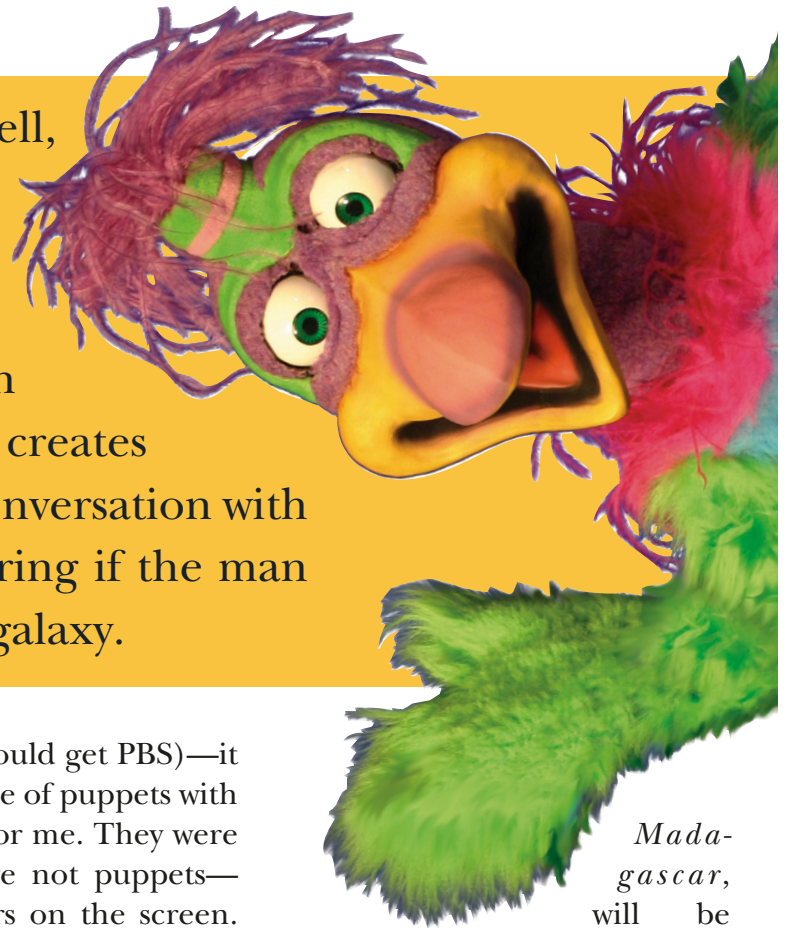




THE CREATIVE  
GENIUS OF STEVE  
AXTELL

**BY  
BOBBY  
WARREN**

Do your research on Steve Axtell, and you'll discover he lives and works in paradise: Ventura, California, a coastal city trapped against the ocean by a mountain range. But look at the puppets he creates and try to carry on a semi-serious conversation with him, and you'll soon begin wondering if the man known as "Ax" is indeed from this galaxy.



Since his days as a child in Sandusky, Ohio, Ax has been working to tap his creative genius (our words, not his) and give life to a seemingly endless line (okay—two hundred so far, with more in the pipeline) of creatures and creations trapped inside his brain. One gets the sense that twenty-four hours a day are just not enough for Ax to summon up those images and ideas that emerge from the gray matter and land on pages of notebooks before being turned into an adorable puppet, a magic effect, a comedy prop or voice track.

What set him on this path? Jim Henson and his Muppets, made famous by the Sesame Street children's television program.

"It was magical!" Ax said of the show. "I saw Sesame Street for the first time (my aunt had

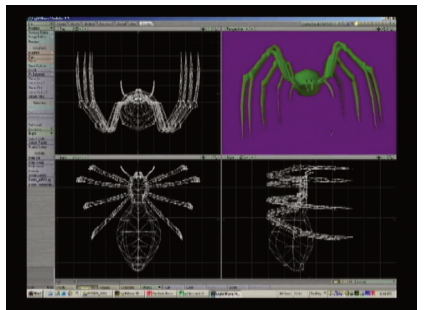
cable TV and could get PBS)—it was the marriage of puppets with TV that did it for me. They were alive—they were not puppets—they were actors on the screen. I don't know why that triggered me, but it changed everything. I became dedicated to the concept of creating puppet characters that would delight audiences around the world."

And Ax has not disappointed. His high-quality puppets and vent figures produced by his company, Axtell Expressions, ([www.axtell.com](http://www.axtell.com)) have been used by movie studios and performers from around the globe. Ventriloquist Kevin Johnson made it to the finals of the "America's Got Talent" show featuring an Axtell Cockatoo, Matilda. The recent AGT first place winner, ventriloquist Terry Fator is now using Axtell puppets in his new Vegas show. Fans of the animated movie,

*Madagascar*, will be pleased to learn Ax's team designed puppets of the film's main characters for promotional red carpet events, Ax said.

Steve and his staff captured the essence of the characters to produce puppet versions of Melman the Giraffe (David Schwimmer provided the voice), Marty the Zebra (Chris Rock), Gloria the Hippo (Jada Pinkett Smith), and Alex the Lion (Ben Stiller). Creating a puppet of Melman the Giraffe was a challenge because his head is too narrow for a hand, his mouth was too far away for direct control, and his neck too long for an arm, according to the company's Web site [www.axtell.com](http://www.axtell.com). The solution was to build an internal hand-operated

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**L to R:**  
Axtell at  
14 and 17.

mouth extension and to have the operator's hand enter directly behind the head, with the neck wrapping around their shoulders.

Axtell Expressions' Amazing Apes Chimpanzee was first used by the Walt Disney Company to promote its Indiana Jones ride at Disneyland. The Amazing Apes Orangutan and Gorilla were used as background apes in the Tim Burton remake of *Planet of the Apes*.

While Ax's creations and abilities have caught the interest of high-profile movie studios and theme parks, his products are designed to make performers of all stripes (or spots, feathers, and fur) look good. The company's puppets are frequent visitors to ventriloquist conventions. However, vents are not the only ones who can use Ax's puppets. Through the magic of AxTrax, voice tracks on CD, other performers, including magicians, can incorporate elements of ventriloquism into their acts without having to master the skills needed to throw their voices.

Steve has several ideas for how non-ventriloquists can add puppets to their shows ([www.axtell.com/cafe.html](http://www.axtell.com/cafe.html)), but as he says in the article on his Web site, "I am not saying do not learn vent...I am saying learn vent but while you are learning you can rock and roll with puppets in your magic show...now!"

A great way to add the feel of puppets in a magic setting is with Axtell Expressions' Magic Drawing Board. The audience watches as the magician begins to draw some eyes and a mouth on a surface, and lo and behold, the drawing comes to life—packing a magical punch and providing a chance to do some puppet work. While on the intellectual level everyone understands a puppet does not have life, it does have shape. To see characters drawn on Ax's Magic Drawing Board become animated is a work of wonder because stuff like that is not supposed to happen.

Axtell Expressions introduced Off the Meter, a comedy prop, in 2006. The performer comes out with a microphone connected to

a meter designed to gauge the audio level of the audience's response. As the performer asks the boys to yell, hoot, and holler the arrow moves across the meter. Next, the girls give their best shot. The back-and-forth continues until finally someone breaks the device when the applause goes "Off the Meter" to a great comedic reaction.

Those using the company's products include puppeteers, clowns, magicians, vents and jugglers. The staff also creates audio and video productions and provides puppetry services for TV and DVD producers. More than a decade ago, Ax served as director of puppetry for the children's show, *Imagineland*, which was featured on PBS affiliates.

Ideas abound in Ax's life. Sometimes it takes years for one to come to fruition, but his mind never stops. During one of the initial interviews for this story (which was conducted using instant messaging over the Internet), he pretended to be Vern the bird, who was using the computer while Ax was away.

Before the interview formally began, Ax sought to save some time (perhaps so he can focus more on his creations) by providing these answers in advance: Yes, no, and maybe. When you chat with him, it's easy to conclude he is a family man who's firmly grounded and having fun doing something he loves to do.

The child in him continues to find its way into his life and work. He was but a child of eight when he began making his first puppets out of scraps of fabric found in his home. He was encouraged by his parents, family, and friends to follow his dreams. Ax even received a letter of advice from Jim Henson. Over time, his wife, Suzi, helped Ax turn those dreams into Axtell Expressions.

On a typical day, Ax said he wakes up between 5:00 and 6:00 a.m. and begins answering e-mails, writing a new AxTrax, or creating a new product. While Ax begins his day at home, those working in production get started at 7:00 a.m.

"If I'm really inspired I'll continue to work at home where it's quiet; if not I'll get to the shop by 10 or 11 after family stuff—Bible study, walking, etc.," Ax said. "I'm typically managing twenty to thirty projects, so things are all over various project tables. Right now, the Remote Board is being revised with new electronics, a big latex baby body is laying on one table, animatronic characters are being created—limbs disconnected, waiting on a



pattern-making session to create a new product."

In 2004, the company broadened its reach when it produced "AxTelevision," a DVD about creating, writing, and filming a puppet movie. "Since you can't unplug the TV and isolate your kids from the electronic universe, you might as well try to use TV to help kids become creative free spirits, learn good values, promote good decision-making, and develop great character," Ax stated in a press release when the DVD first came out.

Because puppets were such an early passion for Steve Axtell, it's difficult to imagine him doing anything else. However, there was a time when he thought he would be going into the field of

psychology, even to the point of working as a psychiatric technician at a state hospital. But, Ax came to his senses and molded his passions and desires into a successful company whose products let performers focus on entertaining instead worrying about complex moves.

Through the years, Axtell Expressions has released hundreds of products, but the business is not just about products. "We sell laughter," Steve says. As thousands of customers can attest, Axtell Expressions also sells creativity and fun—specialties of the company's founder.



*Bobby Warren is a professional journalist who has been interested in magic since he was twelve years old. He also serves as an associate editor for The Linking Ring, the official publication of the International Brotherhood of Magicians.*