

THE QUINNZONE PRESENTS

# MIKE QUINN'S MAGIC MOMENTS



"BE THE MAGICIAN AND  
LET THE MAGIC FLOW"

# **Mike Quinn's Magic Moments**

**Joyful events from my  
life and career that are  
best described as  
"Magic Moments"**



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# Introduction



Are our lives magical? I'll emphatically say YES!

When I was a young lad, along with my glove puppet show, I had a little magic act, using professional props. I would perform at assorted auditions and public places. I wasn't very good and it never went anywhere. I used to love the magic shows on TV. David Nixon was big in the UK at that time during the 1970's. The funny thing is, I used to think the magic I did was fake but the magic he did was real.

As we get older, we become tied up in reality and stop believing in magic. Yet deep down, I believe we secretly wish it was real. Just watch people participating in shows with “Street Magic” magicians. They walk away swearing what they saw was real. They want to believe there is something more.

There are countless events that occur as we travel along our life journey that stand out as being meaningful, special, pivotal and memorable. Moments that present pure joy, open doors, change our destiny, our thinking or potentially even can be lifesaving.

Often incredible inexplicable things happen that some call coincidences, luck, miraculous or even supernatural. Perhaps they are simply Magic Moments.

For every magic moment, there has equally been the opposite, where the mundane, the sad, pained and torment have existed, for as the song goes, “if you want the things you love, you must have showers”. Perhaps that’s why so many people prefer to take baths instead?

The highs and lows of our lives are what make us human. Enduring the darker times and celebrating the lighter ones. But nobody wants to read “Mike Quinn’s Murky Moments”. Although if you do, let me know and I’m sure I can oblige.

So instead, here’s a small random sampling of some of my career related magic moments. Places I have found myself in that to me, either defied logic and explanation and left me with my jaw hanging open, speechless, or left me feeling so elevated I thought I would never come down.

# MAGIC MOMENT NO. 1

**My first time meeting the Muppets  
on The Kenny Everett Radio Show  
(Capital Radio, London, 1977)**



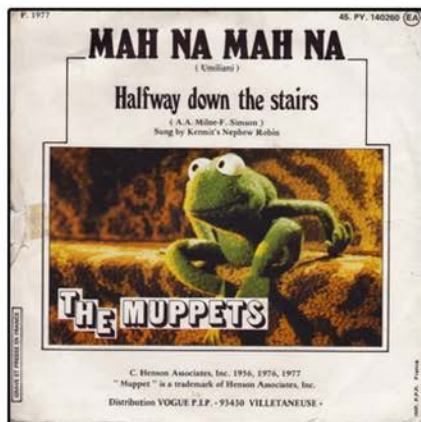


I was 13 years old. The first season of The Muppet show had finished and I was hooked - obsessed even. The Muppets hit it big right away in the UK. Much sooner in fact than the USA. I was super curious about how these puppets were made and operated. There was very little info at that time. But I knew the puppeteers' names from the credits. Something magical was indeed about to manifest.

I used to listen to the Kenny Everett Radio Show on Capital Radio, a Saturday lunchtime London show. Kenny was later known for being the first DJ to play Queen's Bohemian Rhapsody on the radio, playing it 14 times in two days in 1976, crediting him with helping launch this epic track to music fame. He's even portrayed by an actor with Freddie Mercury in the recent Bohemian Rhapsody movie.



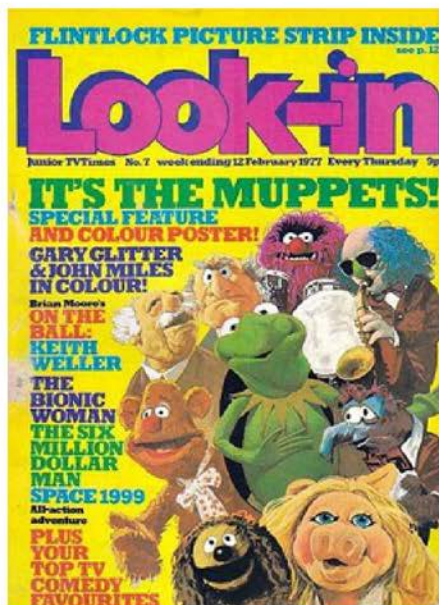
Robin The Frog had just had a Top Ten Hit in the charts with Halfway Down The Stairs. At the end of one Saturday show, Kenny announced the following Saturday he'd have a studio full of cuddliness as he put it, as the Muppets were visiting.



Well, knowing it was a live show and that Capital Radio had to have doors they would need to walk through, I was determined to intercept them going in. So that following Saturday, my school friend David and I took some buses from our home town of Enfield, just outside of north London, UK and arrived at Capital Radio in plenty of time. They had a lobby with a reception and a desk to get merchandise. At the back was a staircase and elevator. So I decided to wait at the bottom of the stairs (no sign of Robin half way down though).

Sure enough, not too long before the start of the show, in came the Muppet five! Jim, Frank, Jerry, Dave and Richard. Like a scene from The Right Stuff, all slow motion on a long lens and a smoke haze. Well that's how I like to remember it anyway.

I had a kids TV magazine called Look-in. The back cover had a full page photo of Jim Henson surrounded by season one Muppets. They each kindly signed my magazine on their way in with a ball point pen I had and I was thrilled as anything.



I listened to the show in the lobby as it aired. At the end they all left. Funny how nobody else knew who they were. After they left, my friend David and I waited a little longer.



Eventually Kenny came out. We of course obtained his autograph too. I still have that one. He had a canvas satchel over his shoulder, stuffed with sleeveless vinyl LP records. Who knew he brought all his own in each week? David asked him how much the Muppet Show LP was, to which Kenny reached into his bag and produced the one he played on the show and gave it to him. It was without the iconic sleeve, which probably ended up in Kenny's collection or pinned to a wall. But he was very gracious to us kids. David later confessed to no longer having that historic disc. Kenny gave it to the wrong person clearly.

That was my first encounter with the Muppet folk, almost half a century ago! Little did I know what lay ahead for me. The magic had already begun.

## MAGIC MOMENT NO. 2

**Walking the red carpet for The Muppet Movie at 14 years of age (London, May 31st 1979)**



By 1979 The Muppet Show was starting its 4th season. There was something in one of the newspapers that mentioned there would be a Charity Royal World Premier of The Muppet Movie in London at the Leicester Square Theatre. There was a phone number to call for tickets. Although I was still only 14, I nervously called the number. A lady answered "Hello, Lew Grade's office...". Whaaaat? No way?

Lew Grade was the owner of ITC Film Company and ran ATV Studios, where The Muppet Show was taped. His brother Bernard Delfont was responsible for bringing Laurel and Hardy and many other big names to the U.K. stage.









Luckily my Mum was a seamstress and had made stage costumes for my sister's pantomime work. So she was able to tailor this larger suit to fit me properly.

The black shoes and white shirt were easy. But I had no bow tie. That following Saturday I remember going into Enfield Town with my sister Hazel to try and find one. I had no idea what I was looking for but the assistant kindly helped. I'm sure it was on elastic but was totally acceptable and affordable on my pocket money. Oddly he exclaimed "There you are! That will be good enough for Kermit The Frog himself". How strange, as I'm sure we never said what it was for.

Well the night of the premier arrived. My Mum was my plus one. Of course she lapped it up as anything remotely connected to movies was considered fancy and she thought she was royalty. We made our way into London, right on time. Sure enough, there was a big old red carpet. Back then Leicester Square wasn't pedestrianised so cars were pulling up and letting all sorts of very well dressed people out. It seemed only fitting to walk that glorious red carpet. Nobody tried to stop us. I remember looking over to the street and seeing people watching me from the barricades. I was sure they were wondering who I was? Was I somebody famous or important? I thought that was so funny.

This was from Jim Henson's "Red Book" notes:

*5/31/1979 - 'Royal Premier- The Muppet Movie- Leicester Square Theatre- w/Princess Anne, Jane, John and Bobbie all go- great evening.'*



We made our way to our seats. Pretty good ones too right in the middle. We waited.... and waited... and waited what seemed like days. Mickey Dolenz came strolling down the aisle to his seat at the front of the stalls. I remember thinking to myself "Well he got the cheap seats, unlike me". Probably the first time I ever felt I was really special. It turned out we were waiting for HRH Princess Anne. I'm pretty sure she was super late! I was not impressed. Especially as I'd managed to be there in plenty of time, all the way from north London!

The lights dimmed and the most wonderful film I had ever seen played out all its songs and gags. Laughter was loud and I was most definitely in a sacred space, like a Muppet church. It truly was magical. Upon leaving, I spotted English comedian, writer and original Goon Spike Milligan in the lobby. No doubt invited due to his recent Muppet Show appearance. He was very gracious and signed my ticket. I clearly recall his comment stating he hadn't seen many celebrities there and sounded disappointed at the fact. Shortly after, I spotted Richard Hunt, who also gladly signed my ticket saying "Oh I see ya got Spike's huh!".





I was in a daze traveling home. It must have been late but I have no idea what time it was when we got home. It was actually a school night and I remember waking up the next day feeling quite nauseous. Needless to say I didn't go to school. Maybe it was the excitement? Who knows? But it meant I was able to catch a live publicity bit that Jim did with Kermit on the lunchtime ITN news!

One final note to add was that the poster for the movie (another Drew Stuzan classic) that adorned my bedroom wall had a signpost to Hollywood on it, marking 114 miles. My house number was also 114. When I see Drew one day, I'll be sure to ask him why it was 114? Prophetic perhaps?

That was my second oh-so epic magic moment Muppet encounter.

# MAGIC MOMENT NO. 3

**Visiting The Muppet Show a short  
bus ride from my home  
(Elstree, ATV (1980))**





By 1979 I had learned The Muppet Show was taped in Borehamwood, Elstree at ATV Studios. I remember being so surprised at hearing that, as I assumed it was an American show. I found it on a map and saw that it was not that far from my house - about 30 minutes west. My Dad at that time was working for a company that provided short horse racing films that would be rented out to clubs and such. People would bet on the winner, just like at a real race. Seems so odd to think of that now. Well early in 1980 the club/bar at ATV Studios booked a night of pre-filmed horse racing. That one event was to inadvertently change my life forever.

Knowing I was so into Muppets, a visit to the taping was secured, with the help of an ATV accountant, who must have been the liaison. My older cousin Dave, my Dad and I all went along. It was Wednesday, which was always the guest star day. Lynda Carter of Wonder Woman fame was taping all her segments. Studio D was where they taped all their variety shows, so it had the raked seating for live studio audiences. Of course Muppet Show didn't have a live audience as it took three days to shoot each episode. But that's where they would seat occasional visitors such as myself.







As you can imagine, I was beside myself with excitement and anticipation. I had made and wore an appliqué Doctor Teeth design on a teeshirt, which caught the eye of someone from the studio floor and I was invited down from the seating.



Standing among the cameras, puppeteers and sets, I was as wide-eyed as could be, fixating upon my beloved Muppets. So much so that apparently I was told later that Lynda Carter asked me something (perhaps about my teeshirt) and I totally didn't even notice! I completely blew her off, haha!





The first half of 1980 was the last of my required schooling. In the UK you could leave at 16 and work a full time job. An option was to remain an additional two years for further education and get higher degrees. I was already making puppets on school time as I was the first boy (and probably the last) in school to take sewing class. The requirement was to make an item of clothing (I chose a shirt) and one creative item. Once I got that pesky shirt out of the way, it was plain sailing! The school job advisors basically told me there was nothing they could do for me and that I should just keep on doing what I was doing. Not working with puppets was not an option as a career for me anyway.

Well somehow I obtained that accountant's phone number and would call him to regularly visit on guest star days. As an added incentive to keep letting me visit, I would bring bribes of chocolates and cigarettes.

Remember at this point I was still only 15! It was certainly a different time. Those days off school were considered part of my “work experience”, although I think secretly the school was glad to see the back of me. The performers and Muppet workshop got to know me there and were always very kind to me. I remember one of the Muppet builders letting me try Kermit on. Furthermore, Jim Henson and Richard Hunt would try out puppets I’d made and brought in and do voices with them.

As if I needed any more encouragement, nothing else mattered in life. Muppets was my present and my future. Somehow I had found this magical secret key, that unlocked all doors into my Muppet world. This was perhaps not just a single magic moment, but a sequence of them. The magic was heating up and this was only just beginning.

## MAGIC MOMENT NO. 4

**Being hired by Jim Henson  
(Elstree Film Studios, 1980)**



In the summer of 1980 I had finished my schooling and was ready to begin my puppetry career. I was actually still 15, which seems really young to be completing school. I had my 16th birthday in July, which is what put me into school at barely 5 years old and technically meant I was 16 before the new school year would have begun. At the same time, The Muppet Show also finished. They had literally moved across the street to EMI Film Studios on Borehamwood high street in Elstree. This is where the first two Star Wars movies were filmed and Raiders Of The Lost Ark had just finished filming. It was actually where Hitchcock made the first British talkie, Blackmail in 1929. Well the studio burned down and was rebuilt but was still one and the same.



In an attempt to visit, the security guy told me they were on location that day in Haddenham Village in Hertfordshire. Locations were typically filmed before the studio interiors. I had brought with me a job application letter, a local newspaper article about me and my puppets and some photos of my puppets, all sealed up in a large brown envelope that I wanted to give to Jim Henson. So somehow I worked out how to take a long series of buses into London and back out to the village. It took most of the day. I arrived with perhaps an hour or so of filming left. It was the scene where the Muppets land in the duck pond, after being thrown out of the airplane. This was my very first experience witnessing an actual film crew.

The day's filming was complete and crew members were wishing Jim a Happy Birthday and handed him a few cards. He was 44, putting the date squarely at September 24th 1980. Well my turn came and I handed Jim my envelope. I'm pretty sure he thought it was a birthday card as he replied "Oh thank you very much" in his almost but not quite natural Kermit voice.

So off I went to my bus stop for my long series of buses home, happy that my mission had been accomplished. I remember seeing all the crew vehicles and limos drive past, feeling slightly embarrassed that Jim & co may have seen my sorry butt waiting for a bus. I think I finally got home about 10:30 that night.



This in itself qualifies for a wonderfully magic moment. However, about two weeks later I received a call from David Lazer, their Executive Producer. They wanted to try me out as a background puppeteer for a week. My heart was in my mouth at this point! It was unreal! Little old me, working for the Muppets - AS A MUPPET PERFORMER!!! That was mad! To get me started, as I wasn't in the UK actors union Equity and they were a bit of a closed shop, I had to join Central Casting, to work as an extra.



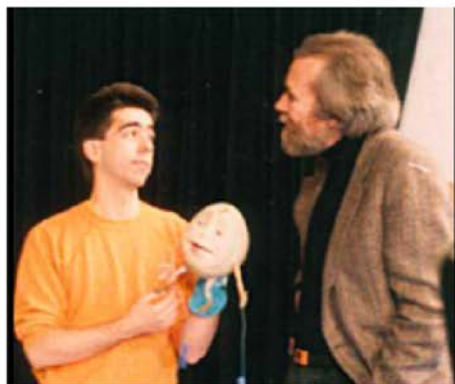
My first week was Epic! All night shoots. The first Muppet I ever worked was The Swedish Chef, leaning out of the Happiness Hotel bus as it arrives at The Dubonnet Club (which was actually the front entrance to the admin building of Elstree Studios).



The second night was in London's West End. They had a stunt driver in a Beauregard Muppet costume and mask, driving that little yellow taxi. In the back, I was sat on the floor, cross legged, with Kermit on one hand and Gonzo on the other. They had little light bulbs inside the car to illuminate them. We kept driving past Harrods in real traffic, around the block.

Can you imagine being one of those cars looking over and seeing Muppets freely driving around London? Haha! You can actually see that shot in the movie. The final three nights were all night shoots at Knebworth House, which became the exteriors of the Mallory Gallery. It was amazing and I truly felt like I was accepted and living the dream. They even gave me a driver to make sure I got home okay in the early hours of the dawn upon wrap.





Years later I heard that jim had said  
“Well he’s here all the time anyway. I  
might as well give him a job!”.

Apparently one concern Jim had that I  
wasn’t aware of, was that he might be  
taking me away from a college  
education. Little did he understand that  
it wasn’t an option for me. I was  
expected to get a job and pay my way.  
But perhaps Jim also understood this  
was my passion and my calling and the  
only way I was going to be able to really  
learn this stuff. He was amazing in that  
respect. He gave me the break I  
needed. From that moment forward I  
worked with him fairly consistently  
until his untimely passing ten years  
later.





At the end of that first week I was paid in cash. It was more than normal too because it was night shoots. I didn't know what hit me. I got to work my dream job with my heroes AND they paid me to do it! What? So what was the first thing I bought? I went next door to the studio to a fish and chip shop and rewarded myself with that delicacy, proudly paid for by my very first wage!

This was the launchpad for my entire career. Everything I learned on my first three movies I'm still using to this very day! Honestly, this was all way beyond magical moments. I don't even have words for what happened and how it felt!

## MAGIC MOMENT NO. 5

**Nien Nunb, Yoda and creatures  
galore in Return Of The Jedi  
(Elstree, 1982)**





In 1979, I saw early pictures of Yoda before Empire Strikes Back was released. I knew it was Frank Oz and was fascinated by how this little guy was going to work. I couldn't wait to see him. Well of course, the movie didn't disappoint and each time the Yoda scenes came up, the movie theatre fell silent. The audiences were transfixed. They had seen nothing like this before. He was the first real time animatronic puppet character on film.

After filming was complete on the Dark Crystal in 1981, later that year I had a little meeting with Star Wars producer Robert Watts in his office at Elstree. It was pretty much just a friendly chat, stating they needed puppeteers for the upcoming movie and that we were already trained in the way of creatures and animatronics. No roles were spoken of and I still had yet to do any sort of audition.

Closer to the end of 1981, I was called into Stuart Freeborn's workshop and got measured up as a backup to be a Jabba The Hutt performer. My understanding is that it was uncertain if they were going to be able to legally have their first choice, Dave Barclay due to Equity union issues. However it was all worked out of course. But it was fun seeing the early stages of Jabba in development.

January of 1982 came along. Tim Rose and I were paired up rehearsing with Sy Snootles, Jabba's Tina Turner styled singer and Admiral Akbar. I also rehearsed with Salacious Crumb as backup. This all happened on Stage 8, the same stage where Jabba's Palace was shot and was close to filming on. Also the same stage where the Dubonnet Club in The Great Muppet Caper was filmed coincidentally.



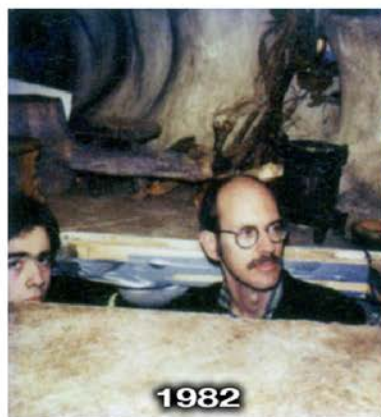
Being a fan of the first two Star Wars movies (and of course Yoda), I was absolutely thrilled to see how the final episode was to unfold in front of my very eyes. I really felt very privileged. I remember Tim and I venturing off to another stage to watch 3PO and Bib Fortuna do their scene entering Jabba's Palace through that large portcullis door.

Phil Tippett also gave me the Ree Yees close up puppet to perform in Jabba's Palace, along with the slug in the archway above Jabba and 3PO. So I was kept busy in that set. Later in that shoot I got to perform baby Ewoks and assist with Jabba's death.



I also became the assistant puppeteer for Admiral Ackbar with Tim Rose, operating cable controls for his eyes and sometimes his mouth. The latter was particularly interesting as when Mon Mothma was briefing the Rebels about the second Death Star, the hologram spinning above the central console had the first bit of CG animation that became the software for Pixar. I was literally underneath that same console working Akbar's cable controls.

One of the biggest thrills (and magic moments) was when Frank Oz asked me to assist him with Yoda, taking over Kathy Mullen's old job performing his right hand. I was small (it was a tiny set) and Frank knew my work from assisting him with Fozzie Bear and more. So essentially it was the same job. It really was an honor to be asked and I loved every second of it. On top of all that, I had secrets nobody else knew of Yoda's fate.







My next insanely ridiculous magic moment on that film was getting the role of Nien Nunb. As was my M.O. I was hanging around the creature workshop one evening playing with the assorted puppets and creatures. It was a small windowed area up some stairs between stages 8 & 9. That block of three stages, 7, 8 & 9 were built probably in the 60's as TV stages. So the windowed area would have been a Director's gallery, where they could look down onto the stages as needed but cut cameras live during taping. It was also the Muppet workshop during The Great Muppet Caper and one of the creature shops during The Dark Crystal. So it was like a home to me by this time. Naturally I would hang out there.



I came across two identical masks sitting on a bench. They didn't have a name yet, just Number Nine from the creature list. I liked the look of them. Without their flying helmets on showing their bald heads, it kind of reminded me of Dopey from Snow White. Phil Tippett saw me pawing over these and mentioned that George (Lucas) was needing a co-pilot for Lando in the Millennium Falcon very soon and had chosen this guy. However, they were just "pull-on" masks with no movement or articulation and he was to have dialogue. He then went on to add that they might have to place an oxygen mask over his mouth to hide that his mouth doesn't move and maybe some air bladders in his cheeks to move during the talking. I instantly thought that there was a better way. I showed him that by putting my hand inside the mouth I could puppeteer it and make him talk, like a large Muppet.

He loved that idea and asked if I could “puppetise” one of the heads and fit it out to work as a puppet? Then we could show George in a week. So I set to work fitting him with temporary finger grips inside, a foam skull to rest on the back of my hand and a foam shoulder/chest piece to fill out the top of his costume. The time came to do a quick film test for George. They placed me with my puppet next to the extra in the other head and began rolling film. George told us to look around and react. I probably said some random stuff to show the lip-sync and mentioned eye blinks could be added. I also wiggled his ears directly with my hand (Stan Laurel style) to show that might be an option. It was all pretty quick. He then turned to Stuart Ziff, an ILM creature tech guy and said “How soon can you have that ready?”. Stuart said two weeks. Good, came the reply from George and off Stuart and Nien went back to the shop in California to be mechanized.

Within two weeks I was booked to puppeteer Nien Nunb! No audition or anything. No read through or rehearsal. The script had no written dialogue for Nien. It just stated he “chattered a liquid alien language” and Lando would respond. Knowing what I knew by this time, we were used to laying down guide voices, especially for creatures. So I had the idea of speaking in English so that the dialogue with Lando would make sense. With that in mind I carefully wrote out my dialogue in pencil, so it could be hastily erased if needed. They were all logical lines such as “Tie Fighters at 12 o’clock” and “We’re not getting a reading on the shield”. By this time, the filming was getting a little bit behind schedule. So while Director Richard Marquand was off on Stage 5 directing the Rancor pit scenes, George actually directed the Falcon cockpit scenes.



I noticed that's not actually documented in the Making of Jedi book. Well the morning of the shoot I apprehensively showed George my suggestion as he sat in his Director's chair. He looked over my dialogue, just looked up at me and simply said "Yes that will be fine". Score!!! I had just made my own job a lot easier to act but also written my own Star Wars dialogue - haha! That definitely goes down as Mike Quinn magic moment history.

The rest is history really. Billy Dee and I got on really well and we bashed out all the scenes from the front and from behind. I had a mild case of motion sickness from the manual rocking of the cockpit by stage hands on its gimbal. Being flat on my back where the bottom of the Falcon seat would have been, was like being in the hull of a boat at sea. I couldn't see the horizon, just the fuzzy flickery image of the camera on my tiny black and white monitor. After the mechanisms were added, he was quite heavy but that added to keeping him grounded and less of a Muppet. Phil Tippett would have to lower him onto my arm through the cockpit window as it was so tight in there. It's still fun to hear people freak out when they learn he was a puppet, not a person in a costume.



Nien is like an old friend now. I was brought back as a legacy character for the Star Wars sequels, episodes 7, 8 and 9. And also in the big ride, Rise Of The Resistance at the two USA Disney parks. During that time as Nien I flew an X-wing, a shuttle and of course, the iconic Tantive IV. The latter had me now having my own co-pilot and filming going in and out of Hyperspace. Although cut from the final edit, my co-pilot for the Tantive was Marcus Mumford, of the music band Mumford and Sons.

I suspect that my magic moments with Nien are not yet over. He's like a genie who keeps on giving.



## MAGIC MOMENT NO. 6

**Interviewing my childhood  
comedy hero, Sir Norman Wisdom  
(London, 1990)**





As a young lad, I always enjoyed the British comedy films of Norman Wisdom. He was somewhat of a UK post war Charlie Chaplin, using slapstick and pathos, often with songs injected into his movies. They were generally lower budget films but were hugely popular with British audiences, tailored specifically to UK sensibilities of the time. Mostly filmed at Pinewood Studios, where I worked on Little Shop Of Horrors, Star Wars movies and more.

For a little history, When Laurel and Hardy were touring Europe, doing their post war stage shows, Stan Laurel saw Norman perform and recommended him to their manager Bernard Delfont, which helped propel Stan to fame. Side note: Delfont was the brother of Lew Grade, who commissioned and made The Muppet Show and the first Muppet films. I do love how it is all connected. Norman even had a brief time of success in America, appearing on The Ed Sullivan Show and met Sir Charles Chaplin himself, comparing their comedic character walks.



L to R: Bernard, Stan, Oliver & Norman

One summer's day, my family were having a day trip to Skegness in Lincolnshire, which is a UK, east coast seaside holiday town. My mother and grandmother were both from Boston, which is about 30 minutes or so from Skegness. I would be about nine years old, so I'm guessing the year would be 1973 or '74? Before storms destroyed everything, there was a long pier that seemed to go out forever over the sand and sea. It was filled with entertainment attractions at the base, such as slot machines and bingo. Out at the very end was a Theatre, which is a common tradition at UK seashores. That day, my favourite, Norman Wisdom was headlining their variety show. I begged my parents for tickets. They sadly told me they were sold out. Thinking back now, that may or may not have been true, as it could have just been a way to save money?





Well my logic was that being a pier, he had to ascend one of two sets of stairs to get to the theatre in the first place. So if I waited, I could intercept and nab an autograph. I'm actually unsure what the rest of my family were doing at the time but they seemed happy to leave a nine year old unattended for ages on the pier. Well I got there a long time before the show started. Still no sign of Norman. People entered the pier and walked along to the theatre. The show began. Still no Norman.



The first half of the show must have been nearly through, when suddenly all alone, up the steps bounded Norman wisdom! In the flesh! He wore a cap and sunglasses, probably to help hide his face. But I knew it was him. I had an old envelope and a cheap biro pen and nervously extended them requesting his autograph. He smiled and obliged, tousled the top of my head and quickly went on his way down the pier. Wow, I actually met him and got his autograph. Even better than just seeing him in any show! I remember wondering why none of my family were interested in waiting to meet him? Off I went with my prize to find my family.



GUESTS FOR THING'S THING

THURSDAY OCTOBER 11, 1990

11.00 am	NORMAN WISDOM
2.00 pm	MICHAELA STRACHAN (children's TV presenter + 'her' in the show 'Hitman and Her')
3.00 pm	STANLEY UNWIN (Batty 'Professor' who specialises in a very individual form of malapropism)
4.00 pm	ANTHONY OWEN (Young magician)

FRIDAY OCTOBER 12, 1990

10.00ish	RAY ALAN + LORD CHARLES (Ventriloquist)
11.00ish	CHRIS PACKHAM + pet tarantula (Presenter of BBC's 'The Really Wild Show')
3.00ish	BARBARA WINDSOR
4.30	GARY WILMOT

Fast forward to 1990 and I was working in a small TV studio in London. I had a puppet character with a chat show for The Children's Channel, for Sky TV. I was able to suggest and request guests and naturally asked for Norman to appear. He was doing some touring at this time, as it was much later in his career. The entire show of mine was unscripted and totally improvised, with multiple segments in between cartoons.



I did say to his manager that Norman can just come as himself and we can just chat about comedy and his career. Well the morning of the taping came. He showed up entirely in what was known as his Gump character. Tight fitting suit and cloth cap. I was stunned that he went to all that trouble. That to me was like asking to interview Chaplin and him turning up as The Tramp! I suspect he just felt more comfortable performing his character than having to be himself. Also, I think he was such a giver. A true entertainer in every sense of the word. Very much one of the final links from older Music Hall and Vaudeville traditions.

We taped multiple links and had such a laugh. I was exhausted by the end because the segments were so long and such high energy! I told him of that day on the pier he was kind to me all those years before, to which he just humbly smiled. I also saw his current tour at that time. He maintained an hour of solid physical comedy and played several instruments, having the audience in stitches. Pretty amazing for a man of 74 years of age. At the end of the show as I was leaving, I saw his straight man, Tony Fayne waiting by the curb, unable to get a taxi back to his hotel. In one final act of gratitude, I was able to offer him a ride, to which he seemed just so relieved and grateful.







They say you should never meet your heroes. For me it was such a gift. A way to connect the dots not only from my childhood, but to be connected to that lineage of visual slapstick comedy and feel that perhaps in some very small way, I could be a part of that story. If that's not a Magic Moment, then nothing could ever be!

# MAGIC MOMENT NO. 7

**Phil Tippett, Ray Harryhausen  
and I (Northern California, Pixar,  
2002)**





I left my character animation job at Pixar in about the year 1999, while they were still at their original campus in Point Richmond, CA. When there, we could watch the progress of the new purpose built Studio from our computers and even pan and tilt the cameras to look around as it was under construction. They asked us all what we would like to see in the building and on the grounds. I suggested a nice smooth path all around the building for roller blading, but that didn't seem to go down too well, haha!

I kept in touch with many of my old buddies there and even returned to do a scratch voice for a character in Finding Nemo as they were putting their animatic storyboards together. The character eventually got scrapped and merged into Dory.

However, I somehow got invited to an event at the new Studio Campus honoring legendary stop motion animator Ray Harryhausen. It was for some sort of achievement award but I've yet to trace the details online. It was quite an epic event though, mostly held in the large Atrium. I had seen Ray give talks a few times before but had not met him properly until this day.



Over at a table by the dining area, I spied George Lucas. Sitting there all alone. So I decided to approach him, for old time's sake. I reminded him of who I was and what I'd done (to help him make even more money). He seemed to know who I was as he nodded and said "Oh yeah!". Bare in mind this was after the special editions of the original trilogy and part way through creating the prequel trilogy. Knowing he had a preference for all things digital and no things puppet at this stage, I asked him what he thought the future was for puppetry in films? I mean, since he'd replace poor Sy Snootles, Jabba's singer and even Yoda with CGI, I really wanted to know what he had to say. His answer was actually quite telling. He replied "The place for puppetry now belongs on the stage, in things like The Lion King", which he'd clearly been to see and enjoyed. This was where his head was at, in all fairness.



Was he wrong? For his own opinion, not at all. For the industry in general and in my own opinion, yes he was quite wrong. His predictions were more projections of where he thought cinema should go. But history has now shown us that there was a huge swing over time back to more practical effects. That includes hand puppets, animatronics and all sorts of creatures. Less green screen for sure. But also, what I wished for was using the technology to enhance and assist what we did practically. For the most part, this is actually where we have landed now. Using both techniques for what they do best. That is a maturing within the industry. It was a somewhat ironic statement to make as he was there to honour Ray for his lifetime work with stop motion puppets all shot on film. I won't even talk about George's Executive Producer role on Labyrinth.



Which brings me back to my main story. Phil Tippett was there as he got into stop motion animation because of Ray and his predecessors. On the opposite side of the atrium to where George Lucas was sitting, stood Phil and Ray. I forget how I got there, but found myself standing with them, just the three of us. Somehow (and I have no clue how it came about), we were discussing the comedy of Laurel and Hardy. Well who would have known, but all three of us were massive fans! We each seem as surprised and delighted to find this common appreciation we each had too.



Next thing we knew, all three of us were talking to each other and interacting as various Laurel and Hardys! It truly was an unexpected delight. All three of us grinning away at this innocent childlike moment of fun. Doing all the mannerisms and quotes!

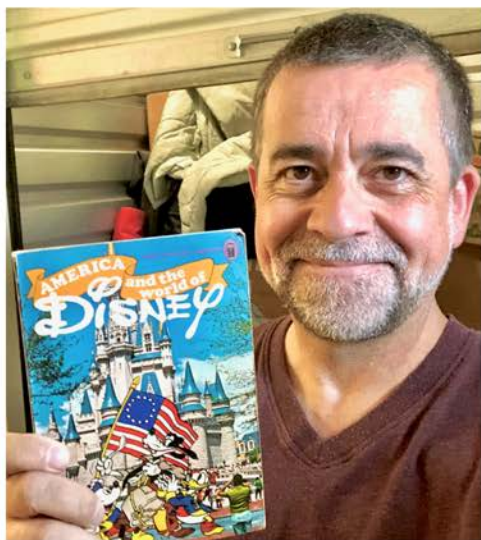
Later that evening many of us crossed the Richmond Bridge to San Rafael, to have dinner at a Chinese restaurant. I ended up at a round table of about six people, including Ray and his lovely wife. These are the truly unexpected Magic Moments that we remember forever. Ones you cannot plan or manufacture. They just reveal themselves at the exact right magic moment.

## MAGIC MOMENT NO. 8

Being featured in a Disney Parade  
(Disney MGM Florida, 2001)







Before Muppets consumed my life, I was a huge Disney fan. Cartoons of any kind too. But I did love the big Disney animated films as a kid. I would spend much of my time drawing and copying the characters. Somewhere in the early to mid 1970's I bought a small book about Walt Disney World from the newsagents with my pocket money. It was filled with tantalizing photos of the rides, costume characters and parades. I burned these images into my mind, wishing and fantasizing about visiting to this far away place on the other side of the globe.



Yet I knew I would never ever visit as at that time, we were lucky to get a day at the seaside, never mind in another country! I did manage to visit Disneyland as a tourist in my young adult life in the 1980's though and loved every second of it.

In 2001 I was invited to appear at Star Wars Weekends at the new Disney MGM studios park in Florida (the first of what would eventually be three appearances). They were several weekends in a row where each weekend would have two guests for interviews, autographs and parades.



My first weekend was shared with actor Phil Brown, otherwise known as Luke Skywalker's Uncle Lars Owen, from the original Star Wars movie. It was lovely hanging out with him and his wife. It was amazing to hear of his stories of how he came to be an actor in the U.K. He was Canadian and acting in the USA. However, he somehow fell foul of that dark time known as the McCarthy witch-hunts and had to leave the country. That all seemed very sad to me. But he ended up having a great acting career in the U.K. and seemed ultimately happy.

In Star Wars Weekends, the first order of the day was a motorcade parade that left from a secret gate at one end of the park, went down the Hollywood Main Street and over to an outdoor stage, where we would both sign our names and create a handprint in cement. I did several of those but have no idea where the cement autographs went.



I assume they were discarded or given away? Luckily Jim Henson's is still there, outside on the ground at their version of Grouman's Chinese Theater, from when Jim was heavily involved with filming down there, just before he left us.

The parade itself, which started first thing in the morning, consisted of two convertible cars, where the actors would sit up on the back with their feet on the back seat so everyone could see them and wave and greet fans. Also were plenty of Star Wars costume and face characters with Star Wars music blaring and an announcer heralding out arrival over tannoys along the way. The streets and curbs were lined with eager families cheering us on.

Now, of course I found this immensely exciting and more than a little surreal. They were cheering little old me! Talk about imposter syndrome. All was going great. But about halfway along, I felt my eyes welling up with tears of joy. This was quite unexpected and surely not what is supposed to happen to actors in parades? I literally got so overwhelmed. Not only was I appearing at Disney in a professional capacity, but I was in my own damn parade! How did this happen? That little lad with his Disney book was now a part of that story.

It's something I'll never ever forget. How it felt to be in that moment. That very Magic Moment!





## **MAGIC MOMENT NO. 9**

**Performing at the Hollywood Bowl  
with the Muppets and the LA  
Philharmonic  
(Hollywood CA, 2017)**







I remember so vividly watching Tom & Jerry cartoons as a kid. One that won an Oscar was when Tom played the Hollywood Bowl as a concert pianist wearing a fancy tail coat. The entire time Jerry was trying to mess him up. This was just one time the iconic venue showed up in films and old Hollywood references as much as the famous Brown Derby restaurant. Second in fame only to the actual Hollywood sign itself on the hillside. It's the epitome of historic Hollywood. Only the very best got to perform there. Acts such as The Beatles, Sinatra, Garland, Hendrix. Pretty much anyone who was anyone performed on that stage. It's now the largest outdoor amphitheater in the world!

For some context, I must rewind a tiny bit to 2016. Someone had this crazy idea to do a live set of the Muppets' Doctor Teeth and the Electric Mayhem on a concert stage. Such a thing had never been attempted before. Five songs, lasting 25 minutes at Outside Lands, San Francisco. We were the warm up for Third Eye Blind! Special arm prop rigs had to be built for the principle puppeteers so they could keep the puppets up for much longer durations than was normal. They also wanted to see further down on the puppets, showing legs, to make it more visual. Therefore people such as myself were brought in to puppeteer legs and feet. I was supporting Steve Whitmire on his original character Lips, the trumpet player. We had rehearsed in a studio the week before and it all seemed possible. But how would it be received? What would live audiences think? Well we were about to find out.



Other acts preceded us, rolling in and out their respective musical rigs. Then came our turn. The anticipation and excitement was pretty intense. Microphones, speakers and TV monitors were all in place. In pumped the smoke and on came the intro video on the screen behind us. Well the many thousands cheered and even sang along to the songs! They were so into it. It was both a shock and a joy to be a part of that.





At the end of the set they were all cheering for more. I do wish we could have delivered. But our time slot was up and that was all we had. Out we all came to take our bows. It truly was exhilarating to feel like a rock star, even just for those brief few moments. After us came Third Eye Blind and the Headliner Lionel Richie. I was so thankful for my All Access Backstage Pass the rest of that night!



Knowing what was now possible, an entire full length show was secured at The Hollywood Bowl. Well three nights actually. Some of the Electric Mayhem set was folded into the show. But this time, it was pretty much like a live Muppets show on Stage. A two hour event!

It featured the opening Muppet Show theme (I performed Miss Piggy in the famous arches). Pigs in Space. Songs, sketches and plenty of Muppet classics. To help us along, they had the entire LA Philharmonic playing behind us. Bobby Moynihan was our human victim/host (almost a Muppet himself).







He was such a big Star Wars fan and brought in his Nien Nunb figure for me to sign. He was so great to work with. For the finale Paul Williams came on stage and led a medley of his songs, finishing with the greatest of all, The Rainbow Connection. The stage was filled with Muppets, all singing along, as indeed were the audience. While it's true many audience members confessed to us later they were in tears, what took us puppeteers by surprise is that we were all caught up with emotion too! It's actually quite hard to perform and focus when filled with tears of joy.



Just picture it, the Muppets, Paul Williams, the audience all singing as one, with the Philharmonic directly behind us playing live. Then punctuated by fireworks above! Let me tell you, I've experienced some intense highs performing but this was probably the greatest of all! For me personally, it was full circle, as I was taken back to that day at the Premier of the Muppet Movie, seeing The Rainbow Connection being performed for the first time, by Kermit, all alone in that vast swamp.

The Muppet I was performing for much of that medley was one called Beautiful Day Monster. A blue furry guy with strong brows and a flat head.

Coincidentally he was in a sketch with Paul Williams when he appeared on the very first season of The Muppet Show in 1976. It was also one of the very first episodes I'd ever seen. The sketch was about Paul being a travel agent and the monster wanting to go to Pittsburg. So before we were about to go on, I went up to Paul as we were waiting in the wings. I squared the monster up right in front of him and growled "I wanna go to Pittsburgh!". He laughed and seemed to appreciate it, commenting on his own hair now being the same as the Monster's. I told him "I wasn't sure you'd remember that, from all those years ago?". He looked me directly in the eye and smiled as he said "Of course I do. I remember everything". That was just the delicious icing on the best cake ever for me.



One final thought I'd like to share that gave me a big chuckle. I used my navigator to guide my car to our parking at the Bowl. Once at the destination it proclaimed "You have arrived". I thought to myself "Yes I have.... I really have...."!

So okay, I think I lost count over how many Magic Moments this chapter contained. I'll leave that up to you to decide because I think I lost count at a few hundred as I thought about all the things in this show!



# MAGIC MOMENT NO. 10

**Jim Carrey and The Wizard Of Oz  
(MGM Studios LA, 2018)**





In a rare departure from Muppets and Star Wars, I landed a job as puppeteer on a Showtime series called Kidding. It was a show about a children's TV host navigating personal crisis and growth, played by Jim Carrey. The character he played, Jeff Pickles was reminiscent of Mr Rogers and had an ensemble of puppet and costume characters. Kidding was very much an adult show where sometimes us puppeteers could be seen behind the scenes.

On the first episode I caught Jim studying me going through some puppet moves from across the set. I guess he appreciated the artist privately enjoying his art? Or he was just being entertained by puppets? After a short time we got to know each other a little, to the point of him sharing his snacks with me. Who knew Jim Carrey enjoyed deviled eggs? I enjoyed my chats with Jim off set about everything from LA real estate, dodgy Presidents and the evolution of mankind.

I felt compelled to satisfy my own curiosity and asked him if he had ever met Jim Henson? He sadly looked down and answered “No I never did unfortunately”. “That’s a shame” I replied. I couldn’t help wondering how the two might have both enjoyed each others talents and great minds but what might they have created together? On that note, Carrey was very thoughtful and collaborative on set, helping us with visual ideas and dialogue changes. Even to the point of my puppet accidentally crashing a silver server lid on his head during a song, being mortified and breaking the take. He wanted me to keep going saying “Curse your humanity!”, haha!



The two seasons were made at Sony Studios in LA. Formerly known as one of Hollywood's greatest studios, MGM. I always enjoyed researching the history of any location and even what was filmed on specific stages. Stage 27, next door to us, where catering had been set up, was where Munchkinland was filmed for the Wizard of Oz. Curved iron tracks were still in the ceiling, used for the Flying Monkeys. Another stage we shot on, Stage 14 was used for the tornado sequence. But Jim's character Jeff Pickles' main studio set was on stage 26, where the cornfield was shot, including the Scarecrow's iconic "If I Only Had a Brain" song.





So one morning on set I related this to Jim Carrey in between scene setups. He immediately focused in and got very serious. He seemed kind of shocked. But in a good way. He then told me that was his favorite part of the movie and that he loved the idea that his character Jeff had his set in the same stage as the Scarecrow. I swear he got a bit emotional. I think it was a connecting the dots moment that took him back to his childhood.

This was clearly a magic moment for Jim himself and in turn, a magic moment for myself to not only bring this for him but to witness his reaction. So what better way to complete this list than with a double-whammy magic moment.

# Conclusion



So these are very specifically career related magic moments. It's hard to keep them to just the ten outlined here. When compiling my list, I also discovered there were many more of what I call micro-magic moments. Smaller yet fun events that brought me such joy at the time and still make me happy as I recall them.



My wish is that reading this, you may reflect upon your own personal magic moments. I know you have some.

Perhaps make a list and share them with me or your loved ones? I think some come about as a direct result of our actions and some via external universe timings. Or maybe they are one and the same. Are we all a little magical anyway?

As you go about your day, be mindful and aware you may be in the process of manifesting a magic moment for yourself, or just as likely but less obvious, a magic moment for someone else.

“You cannot leave the magic” - Gobo Fraggle

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