

## Spank You Very Much

Written by Mike Schulz  
Tuesday, 25 April 2006 18:00

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Dave Levora and Darren Pitra – hosts of 97 Rock’s “Dave & Darren in the Morning” (airing Mondays through Fridays, 6-10 a.m., on WXLP-FM 96.9) – have had me as a weekly guest on their program for years. Yet I won’t kid myself. The duo’s most *popular* recurring guest is most likely Spank the Monkey Puppet, whose ribald humor and warped simian-tics will be on display in My Verona Productions’ stage presentation

*Spank: One Night, One Monkey*

, at Rock Island’s ComedySportz venue at 10 p.m. on Friday, April 28.

After appearing on Dave and Darren’s show for more than two years, I had yet to officially *meet* Spank. (We could *not*

agree on where to conduct the interview: I suggested a coffee house, he preferred a tree...) And after agreeing to a brief photo shoot, he didn’t stay to answer questions – snapshots were taken, obscenities were uttered, and he was off.

But we finally agreed to converse through e-mail, and in addition to offering a preview of what *One Night, One Monkey* audiences can expect – “There’s singing. There’s dancing. There are jokes that might tug a heartstring or two...” – Spank provided illumination on a variety of subjects, with special thanks to Dave Levora, who I understand did the typing.

**Mike:** Thank you so much for taking the time out of rehearsals for this interview.

**Spank:** Thanks for having me! Some ground rules: I will not discuss my failed marriages, my relationship with Jennifer Aniston, or my deep, personal belief in Scientology. I’m game for anything else you got for me, though!

**Mike:** Amazing as it may seem, there are some people in the area who don’t know who you are. Could you give us a little personal background, some understanding on how you got into comedy, and explain how you found your way to the Dave & Darren show?

**Spank:** Stop me if you’ve heard this one, but I was born into a show-biz family. My father was a puppet on the old Edger Bergen show and my mother was one of Joan Crawford’s mohair

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sweaters. Ba-dump-bump! No, seriously, Mike, I can't imagine doing anything else. I'm a monkey puppet! What am I gonna do? Work in a toll booth? That's not me, baby. As for the Dave and Darren thing, that show *struggled* before I showed up. I mean, it was on life-support. I started doing my bits and now they're number one. That ain't a coincidence. This is what I do. I'm like a comic King Midas. Everything I touch takes off like a rocket ship. And where is that rocket's destination? A planet I call "Laughter."

**Mike:** Your material is considered risky and your jokes are rather blue, yet you find yourself working in the heavily-regulated area of radio. Do you feel your comic style is cramped by your format? What are your opinions on the FCC?

**Spank:** Red Skelton told me years ago, "Spank, don't work blue. It's too easy." You know what I told him? "Go screw, yourself, Skelton!" The FCC ain't my problem. That's for Levora and Pitra to worry about. FCC, BBC, KFC, whatever! I gotta be free if I'm gonna be me. It's the "risk" you speak of that gets me where I need to go. I gotta have the action!

**Mike:** After escaping their safer berths of radio and television, puppets, Muppets, and marionettes have had a notoriously difficult time being accepted in movies and on the stage. It seems they have to do something truly extraordinary to cross over successfully. Kermit rode a bicycle -- what do you have in store for audiences at *Spank: One Night, One Monkey?*

**Spank:** You got balls, kid. Are you kidding me?!? You're gonna have me in your paper for some interview and ask me about Kermit the Frog? How dare you! Jim Henson should burn in hell for what he did to our craft. Teaching kids how to read? Muppets demean us all. I say this not only as a Puppet-American but as a monkey puppet who cares deeply for how we as performers are perceived. Muppet? Like Marionette and Puppet? What? You think you're better than me? The audience on Friday night will get to see the whole schmeer. There's singing. There's dancing. There are jokes and some stories that might tug on a heartstring or two. My goal is to have the audience as exhausted as I am by the time the show is done. You will be moved.

**Mike:** Your one-monkey show is being presented by My Verona Productions. What kind of deal did you have to work out to be associated with this organization? I mean, this year they're doing Mamet, Bogosian, and *The Pillowman*, for Pete's sake. Isn't your show considered a little lowbrow for them?

**Spank:** Lowbrow? You didn't do your research, did you? Don't talk to me about Mamet! You ever heard of a little thing called *Glengarry Glen Ross*? They say the f-word no less than 138 times. Yet *I'm lowbrow?* Listen, I've worked with Mamet. I was the one who told him the stage play needed the Blake Vinuzzo speech to make it work. That thing about the steak knives. He wrote that down on a cocktail napkin when I was brainstorming with him one night over drinks. Did I get any credit? No. That's why you critics get to look down your nose at me and treat me like a nobody. Ask my fans and they'll tell you. I'm not the nobody.

*You're*

the nobody! Lowbrow? If telling jokes about broads and whatnot makes me "lowbrow" then so

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be it. My understanding is that My Verona is going to make sure the show is promoted with posters and that kind of thing. Also, they are supposed to take care of my rider and backstage deli tray. We'll see how that goes.

**Mike:** Fans have been waiting for you to do a live show for some time. Why, now that we have one, is it only running for one night? Why not an indefinite run?

**Spank:** Can you put a rainbow in a paint can? No. Can you grab lightning and put it in your pocket and save it for later? No. It's one night and one monkey. Is it the only night? No. Am I the only monkey? No. This is just one of those nights. I've done the stage thing before. Stand up, community theatre... I've been up there putting it on the line for longer than you've been alive, Schulz. I got shoes older than you.

**Mike:** Darren Pitra has been your comic foil for some time now. What can you tell us about Darren, and your successful partnership? And is it true that his fantasy is to one day have his clock cleaned by the Russians?

**Spank:** He does talk about that a lot, doesn't he? I'm glad someone else noticed. The thing about Darren is, he gets me. Working with just Levora was just brutal. The kid has no timing. I mean zero. As you know, timing in my game is everything. Pitra does a good job of not stepping on the punchline and staying out of my way. You can't teach funny. You are born with it and Darren, thank God, was born with a funny-spoon in his mouth. The other guy... eh, not so much.

**Mike:** What's your response to the claim that sock puppets are mere lackeys, identity-free shells for the comic with his or her hand up your ass?

**Spank:** Who's making that claim? You? I got an identity. Come and see the show on Friday and ask yourself: Which one of us is the puppet, man? It's pretty deep. As for the hand-up-the-ass thing, I get that a lot. As long as Levora keeps his fingernails at a reasonable length, there's no problem.

**Mike:** How do you answer charges that your signature catchphrase -- "Later, fags!" -- is offensive to the gay community?

**Spank:** Well, it's said with love, isn't it? I wouldn't call an actual gay person a fag. That's mean, not funny. I do funny. Dave and Darren have asked me repeatedly to knock it off with that send-off, but it's a great closer! You don't work in show business for as long as I have without meeting a lot of the gays. They get it. I asked a gay buddy of mine if he was offended and you know what he said to me? "You go, Spank!" Then he snapped his fingers in the air like the fruits on the TV do. Ba-dump-bump.

**Mike:** Our national obsession with monkeys in the arts seems to blow hot and cold. For example, for every Clyde there's an Ed. For every King Kong there's... well... a King Kong. What is your take on America's love-hate relationship with simians in the entertainment world?

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**Spank:** Well, I'm not a monkey. I am a monkey puppet. There is a difference. I guess people like monkeys because they kind of look like people. Little hairy people who swing from trees and throw their poop around. Monkeys are in vogue right now, but I ain't going to ride that wave. This monkey thing is a passing fad. Long after the Curious George stuff is in the clearance rack and people move onto something else, I will still be telling jokes. Fads come and go. Talent is eternal. By the way, Ed was a guy in a suit. That wasn't a real monkey. There was a real controversy over that.

**Mike:** Throw out some pop-culture opinions for us. What's your take on Tom and Katie? Lindsay Lohan? Gwyneth naming her child Moses?

**Spank:** Moses is a great name for a kid. I understand his middle name is going to be "Playground Beating." Ba-dump-bump. And now Tom Cruise had a kid with that kid from *90210* or whatever. What did they name that kid? Nebacanezzer or some damn thing? If I were to have a baby with any of these starlets, I guess I'd go with Lindsay Lohan. She has the hips for childbirth. We'd give the kid a decent name, too, like Eddy or Frank or something like that. I'm not sure I'd name him Spanklin Jr., 'cause that's a lot of pressure for a kid to live with, following in my footsteps. I imagine Lindsay would have something to say about what we called our half-human / half-monkey puppet bastard child. I'm willing to hear her out.

For more information, visit <http://www.daveanddarren.com> .