

PEE-EE

RIDES AGAIN

AFTER CARRYING TABLOID BAGGAGE FOR 18 YEARS, PAUL REUBENS IS BACK IN THE SADDLE—AND IN THE PLAYHOUSE. READY FOR A BIG ADVENTURE, BOYS AND GIRLS?

Paul Reubens is doing one of the things he does best: obsessing. “I am constantly hoping that, like, I’m still relevant at all,” he says in a voice—higher than most men’s, slightly nasal—that’s still familiar, even after all these years.

Wandering around the Hollywood Museum, just a few blocks from his star on the Hollywood Walk of Fame, he has lingered over the red-and-white vintage bicycle that he rode in his 1985 movie *Pee-wee’s Big Adventure*. He has appraised the display containing the skinny gray suit (with red bow tie) that was his uniform on his Saturday-morning TV show, *Pee-wee’s Playhouse*, which aired on CBS from 1986 to 1991. But it’s not the Pee-wee Herman memorabilia, which sits near W.C. Fields’ top hat and Brendan Fraser’s *George of the Jungle* loincloth, that sets off Reubens OCD. Instead, the trigger is Bob Hope’s honorary Oscar. “When I was a kid, I’d always watch Bob Hope and go, like, ‘I know he must’ve been funny, but is he past his prime?’” Reubens says. “What I’m trying to prove now is that I still have it, I’m still around—I still am Pee-wee Herman, and Pee-wee Herman is still funny. So I’m feeling very Bob Hope—hoping I don’t see a parallel.”



Yes, that's right: The 57-year-old actor, best known for embodying the oddball man-child with the puppet friends (and also for two tawdry scrapes with the law), is about to don the skinny suit again to perform as Pee-wee for the first time in 19 years. Starting in early January in Los Angeles, Reubens will star in an elaborate live show in which Pee-wee years to fly, gets his wish, and then gives it away. For anyone who likes allegories, as Reubens does, this one is a doozy.

Consider: Since the age of 5, when he asked his father to build him a stage in their Peekskill, New York, basement, Reubens wanted to entertain. After completing high school in south Florida, he went to art school in Los

Angeles, where he joined the improvisational comedy troupe the Groundlings and developed a skit about a man-child who wanted to be a famous comic. He took the first name from Pee-wee-brand harmonicas. In a fit of pique, after he lost out on a role on *Saturday Night Live*—to Gilbert Gottfried, of all people—Reubens borrowed \$5,000 from his parents to turn that skit into a stage show. It spawned an HBO special (*The Pee-wee Herman Show*), two feature films (*Pee-wee's Big Adventure* and *Big Top Pee-wee*), and ultimately the hit TV show. Then, while on a self-imposed hiatus from Pee-wee's Playhouse, the once-high-flying Reubens fell to earth.

In July 1991 Reubens was arrested for indecent exposure in an adult theater in Sarasota, Florida. He pleaded no contest while maintaining his innocence, but the resulting media feeding frenzy derailed all things Pee-wee. With his alter ego sidelined, Reubens spent several years out of the public eye, writing and collecting—obsessively. He fervently hoards everything from sunglasses to foot-measuring devices, fake food to yearbooks (he has amassed 8,000 of them). He played the occasional bit part before finally landing a career—restructuring role: as a hairdresser turned drug dealer in Ted Demme's 2001 drama *Blow*. Then, just when things were looking up, police raided Reubens' house and, in 2002, arrested him for having what authorities called a collection of child pornography. In fact, the offending "collection" comprised a VHS tape of Rob Lowe's sex romp and turn-of-the-century erotica images featuring men and women—but no children. Friends vouched for Reubens, saying he was an insatiable collector who often bought in bulk, books and magazines in particular, and that there was no way he could know everything he'd amassed. It didn't matter. Even though his child-porn charges were ultimately reduced, 16 months later, to a misdemeanor possession-of-obscenity rap, the damage was done. To most people, Pee-wee was a kiddie-porn-purveying perv.

"All this stuff that happened—the quote-unquote treatment I received—was not an inducement to come back to work," Reubens says now. He looks good—clean-shaven and pale, with a closely shorn Pee-wee 'do, trim blue jeans, a black-and-green retro short-sleeved button-down, and black Cole Haans. "To wait for somebody to give me permission to have a career wasn't going to happen, you know?" Now Reubens is perched on a couch under a photo of Carole Lombard in the museum's private ballroom. He's friends with the institution's owner (nutty collectors stick together), and when she enters the room, he jumps up and thanks her profusely for hosting us. When she asks him to attend a benefit, however, he balks. "I'd love to come," he says, his eyebrows leaning together. "But I have no life outside of writing my show right now." She asks if the museum can borrow one of his Emmys for the event. (He has two—one that he won, another that the Academy gave him when his first one was damaged.) "Are you kidding?" he asks, his voice squeaking higher. "I don't know where they are. They're in storage somewhere."



BIG TOP: Reubens wants to attract a diverse audience to his stage revival of *Pee-wee's Playhouse*.



For more on the funny man and the comedy of Pee-wee's Playhouse, visit [details.com](#).

For Reubens, all this hoarding is both a blessing and a curse. "I go into a junk store and see some antique thing, and my mind goes: Someone's going to break that in 10 more minutes." Instead, he "rescues" it, promising to love it always. There's just one problem: "You can't love the amount of stuff I have. I filled up my house three times. I have, like, multiple storage units."

That undying affection for evocative objects was part of Pee-wee's unique appeal. His beloved bike wasn't just vintage cool, it had those multicolored plastic streamers on the handlebars that just scream, with childlike immodesty, "I know this is cool!" Some of the best-loved characters on his TV show were animated inanimate things: Chairry the overstuffed chair, Globey the globe. Pee-wee made animals by sticking pencils into potatoes; he had "Fun With Tape," making scary faces by wrapping sticky cellophane around his head. Though it had admirers of all ages, Pee-wee's Playhouse was written "for 5-year-olds," Reubens says; the show's best moments were those he could imagine making "a 5-year-old fall off the couch." That made it all the more awful when police, acting on a tip, pawed through Reubens' mountain of stuff and declared he had a thing for minors.

"I don't want anyone for one second to think that I am titillated by images of children," Reubens said on *Dateline NBC*. "The public may think I'm weird. They may think I'm crazy. . . . That's all fine. As long as one of the things you're not thinking about me is that I'm a pedophile. Because that's not true."

But Reubens' fondness for Pee-wee never went away. "I always loved being that character," he tells me, his eyes tearing up as he recounts his previous evening's activity: introducing the annual outdoor screening of *Pee-wee's Big Adventure* at the Hollywood Forever cemetery. "There were 3,000 people there," he says. "I could feel the love." Pee-wee never seems to have been far from his mind. In the wake of *Scandal No. 2*, he devoted himself to finishing two Pee-wee movie scripts. The "dark" one he describes as a "sort of Valley of the Dolls Pee-wee story" about what happens when Pee-wee gets famous (hint: He becomes a monster). Reubens has tried to interest studios in that screenplay but had no luck. The second script, based closely on the TV show, is more obviously

family-friendly: Pee-wee's Playhouse, *The Movie*. That script is "perfect," he says, admitting he's been working on it, off and on, since before his 30th birthday—before he first brought Pee-wee to the theater.

That screenplay, in fact, is the main reason Reubens is taking Pee-wee back onstage: He wants—needs—to prove to the Hollywood machers that he can still pack a house. He doesn't want to do it forever. Just long enough to convince "five people at five studios" that he's bankable.



I KNOW YOU ARE, BUT WHAT AM I? Dogged by scandal, Reubens wants to redeem Pee-wee.

"I can't walk into somebody's office with my background and expect they're going to see it, you know?" So he's going to prove it to them. He hopes. "It's a drag to have tabloid baggage. It's weird to have your career be a footnote to that, especially when you love what you do." But he's over it, he says. "I'm not giving people that power anymore."

The Casio watch on Reubens' wrist begs, alerting him that our time is almost up. "Speaking of obsessive-compulsive," he says self-deprecatingly, noting that he lives his life by the alarm chimes. Reubens is not humble about Pee-wee's cultural impact, and he has no reason to be. It's been said more

than once that without him, there would be no SpongeBob Squarepants on TV, no Mini Me in the Austin Powers movies, no Thom Browne pencil suits. Rock bands—Au Revoir Simone and Mr. Bungle—are named after bits in his TV show. Pee-wee made childlike allusion part of the fabric—not the fringe—of America. When I mention that *Pirates of the Caribbean* (particularly Johnny Depp's role) owes a debt to Pee-wee, his eyes twinkle. "So does *Charlie and the Chocolate Factory*," he says.

Perhaps the most groundbreaking part of Pee-wee's Playhouse was its diverse cast, which included Laurence Fishburne and S. Epatha Merkerson, and a bevy of other actors of color. But Pee-wee's wacky world wasn't just colorblind—social outcasts were welcome, and the show proved effeminate gay camp had mainstream appeal. It was a quirky, polyglot utopian oasis in Reagan-era America.

The new stage show—which will have about a dozen cast members, including puppeteers (and will feature familiar memes like "today's secret word")—will be true to that spirit. Out of respect for his slain friend Phil Hartman, who played Captain Carl, that character has been retired; Cowboy Curtis, the part Fishburne played, will get a larger role in his place. Reubens has also struck a first-of-its-kind pact with Ticketmaster to reach out to diverse audiences. When e-mail alerts appeared to be sent to mostly white consumers, one of the show's producers complained to the booking company; the employee he reached revealed she was African-American and that she had grown up watching Pee-wee.

"She said, 'It was not lost on me that the King of Cartoons was a black man, and that had a big meaning for me.' It doesn't cost anything to be nice to somebody versus being ugly," Reubens says, turning introspective. "This is where Pee-wee and me may not be relevant anymore, seriously." I posit that kindness, pluralism, and fun with tape might be just the balm for what ails us today. Pee-wee won't be our savior, Reubens says. "I can't be that, because that doesn't work for comedy." But isn't the resuscitation of this eighties-era Peter Pan itself a quixotic rescue mission? The question prompts a duh-Dottie-don't-you-know rejoinder that sounds more like Pee-wee than Paul Reubens: "You can't save the world."