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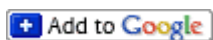
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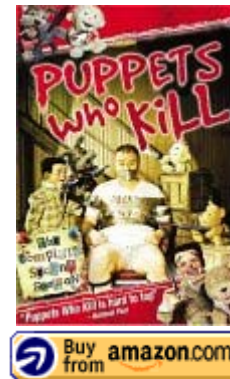
Review by [Bill Gibron](#) | posted July 28, 2006 | [E-mail the Author](#) | [Start a Discussion](#)

The Product:

Hugely popular in its native country (where its entering its fifth season), *Puppets Who Kill* has yet to translate over to an US audience – and with very good reason. The show is so inherently Canadian, so clearly Canuck oriented in its logistics and pragmatics (lots of social and political references) that it can come across as insular and odd. Besides, it's a series centering on felonious toys trying to turn the corner and rehabilitate themselves back into society – not the easiest of sitcom sells. Two years ago the first season was released on DVD to much fanfare and some critical acclaim. Now, we have an entire second season of puppet prurience to deal with. Still, the question remains – is this cutting edge cultural humor, or do our Northern neighbors substitute sameness for satire? Oddly enough, the answer is a little of both.

The Plot:

Dan Barlow is a Canadian social worker in charge of a halfway house for convicted felons. Under his control are four of the nastiest puppets ever to befool the Great White North's justice system. There is Bill, a ventriloquist's dummy who has inexplicably killed every partner he's ever had – hundreds of them by last count. There's Buttons, a corporate spokes-bear who was fired when multiple charges of sexual



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inappropriateness violated the "moral turpitude" clauses in his contract. Cuddles is a self-help toy that decided to go from therapist to terrorist, while Rocko the Dog is an ex-kids show sidekick with severe anger management issues. After an entire season of trying to return to society, Dan still finds the quartet teetering on the edge of, and frequently flopping over into, immoral, antisocial behavior. Season 2 continues the bedlam with the following 13 episodes:

"Bill Sues" – *during a frivolous lawsuit, our vexed ventriloquist dummy is sentenced to castration.*

"Portrait of Buttons" – *our bawdy bear believes his painted portrait is haunted.*

"Prostitutes for Jesus" – *two call girls with a calling cause trouble in the halfway house.*

"Cuddles the Demon" – *our self-help doll gets possessed by the Devil.*

"Buttons the Geriatric" – *our bawdy bear plans on marrying a rich octogenarian for her money.*

"Dead Ted" – *a former cellmate of our antisocial cur dies before disclosing the whereabouts of his stolen loot.*

"Cuddles the Religious Icon" – *our self-help doll gets the healing touch.*

"Bill's Got the Blues" - *our vexed ventriloquist dummy is depressed over a mandate not to murder.*

"Pizza Boys are Missing" – *during a rash of delivery boy disappearances, our self-help doll and our antisocial cur get jobs transporting pizza.*

"Rocko Gets a Lung" – *Dan appears on a game show to earn money for our antisocial cur's organ transplant.*

"Dan and the Necrophiliac" – *Dan discovers his fetching cousin enjoys sex...with the dead.*

"Rocko and the Twins" – *when our self-help doll dates a pair of conjoined twins, our antisocial cur finds a similarly sour soulmate.*

"The Twilight Place" – *our self-help doll and our antisocial cur buy a cursed television set.*

The DVD:

Though its premise is loaded with prurient potential, *Puppets Who Kill* is just not very funny. It's wacky and inventive, and contains instantly likeable characters that we find enduring and entertaining. But over the course of 13 uninspired half hour episodes, the series premise definitely wears a bit thin. This is your typical attempt at juxtapositional humor, comedy derived from the placement of seemingly innocent items (cuddly stuffed toys) alongside surreal, rebellious behavior (necrophilia, serial killing). Apparently, a certain level of satire is achieved. But instead of being funny, *Puppets Who Kill* is confusing. The show's setup seems to constantly shift, making its human character Dan Barlow a patsy or a catalyst, depending on the situation. One moment he's a mentor, the next he's messing things up. As for the anthropomorphic criminals, they are one note and lacking in subtlety. Buttons has a libido the size of the entire Great

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White North, so every episode that centers on his character revolves around...you guessed it, sex. Same for Bill's propensity toward spree slaughter, Rocko's antisocial stances, and Cuddles inexplicable evil. Of course, this leads to humor's more hated foe – predictability. When you know how a scenario will pay off, when you can tell from the moment the circumstances are stated what the punchline will be, your funny bone barely registers a snicker.

Much of the problem lies in the series' approach to story. Writers Dan Redican, John Pattison, and Steven Western rely far too heavily on a vignette style of narrative, which divides up each plot into bite size bits of craziness. The result is occasional incoherence, with context failing to carry over from one scene to another. A perfect example of this comes in "Prostitutes for Jesus". The premise has the puppets contacting these whores for God because they offer their services to terminally ill patients. They'll feign sickness for a little slap and tickle. Suddenly, the storyline changes to Cuddle's inability to make friends. Then we concentrate on Buttons, who is having an affair with his Yoga instructor. Naturally, her incredibly jealous partner finds out. Instead of finding a way to link all this material together, we are instead treated to a trio of separate situations. Our hookers turn out to be killers, Cuddles ends up being crucified by a religious group who thinks he's a demon, and Buttons is locked in a warehouse, about to be bludgeoned and burned to death. Individually, these circumstantial quandaries aren't very funny. Together, they create a clear attention span predicament. We're not sure who to care about, or what situation the story intends to highlight. The lack of inner contextual connections also points out another problem – some characters here are just more engaging than others.

Of the foursome, Cuddles is the most irksome and pointless. Even in episodes where he is the focus ("Cuddles the Demon"), the lack of any real personality or eccentricity renders him more or less ancillary. The same goes for Rocko, although his raspy smoker's voice gives him an ersatz endearing quality. Yet even when he's the center of a show ("Rocko Gets a Lung") there is very little to this degenerate dog. This means vile ventriloquist dummy Bill and horny teddy bear Buttons must carry the series. Both have potential that is never fully realized and each one tends to stick to the felonious flaw they are given. Had *Puppets Who Kill* expanded on Bill's creepy vibe to make him a truly debased dummy, or had the show decided to make Button's lust more omni-sexual, we'd have an unique take on a typical psycho showcase. But the end result argues for a staid formula that's just not funny. Perhaps the most disconcerting aspect of all however is the human, Dan Barlow (played by Redican). Basically, he's the foil for all the supposed comic mayhem occurring, but he never really comes across as concerned or invested. He can scold his charges in one scene, and then argue for them to break the

law the next. Constantly described as a virginal nerd who can't get laid, Redican never once allows us to see any layers to such lameness. Instead, his Barlow is basically a device, creating exposition when necessary, conflict when the story demands it.

Perhaps the final nail in the coffin of this pseudo-clever creation is a little something called *Wonder Showzen*. The achingly offensive MTV2 kid's show, loaded with more wit and satire than a dozen competing efforts, has cornered the perverted puppet market since its premiere in 2005. Everything *Puppets Who Kill* thinks it is, *Wonder Showzen* actually achieves, and the soiled *Sesame Street* makes it look absolutely effortless. When conjoined twins turn up as Buttons' blind date, the standard sitcom shtick is applied to work out the finale. But in the case of something like *Showzen* (or in the animated realm, *Robot Chicken* or *South Park*), self-referential twists are tried, hoping that the juxtaposition between the expected and the unpredictable creates the kind of tension from which true humor derives. Sure, there will be some who watch this series and wonder aloud why American television channels like Spike TV or Comedy Central haven't picked it up for re-airing. Others will find the frequent foul language, with "S", "P" and "F" bombs abounding, as fresh and brazen. But the truth is that *Puppets Who Kill* grows dull after nearly 300 minutes. Even with all their disconcerting physical traits (they are like humans in every, EVERY way) there is just not enough here to maintain the mayhem. If you are a fan of *Greg the Bunny* or Robert Smigel's *TV Funhouse*, you may enjoy the anarchic adventures of these inanimate objects. Individuals looking for something a little more edgy need to find their confrontational comedy elsewhere. These puppets may kill, but they don't deliver a knockout blow when it comes to humor.

The Video:

Contemporary and slick, the 1.33:1 full screen transfer of *Puppets Who Kill* looks great. The colorful, detailed video image is sharp, sparkling with a great deal of post-millennial professionalism. The puppetry is always unobtrusive and barely noticeable. Wires and rods are hidden within the scenery, and the voice sync up to the action is perfect. From a technical standpoint, the show is sensational.

The Audio:

Like the video, the audio here is excellent. The Dolby Digital Stereo captures the conversations and sound effects in flawless aural superiority, and there is a real depth to the sonics that contributes a sense of authenticity to the setting. Though the music is a little cutesy (too many kitschy joke melodies) the overall auditory landscape is superb.

The Extras:

Where the DVD presentation of *Puppets Who Kill: The*

Complete Second Season comes up short is in the bonus features department. Aside from an appearance on a Canadian Morning Talk Show by some of the cast (funny, but forced) and a collection of text bios (clever, but far from comprehensive) there is a pair of commentary tracks with Redican and the character Rocko delivering the discussion. As with most "fictional" facets, the dog is rather dull as a narrator. Redican is interesting, but having to constantly play to a puppet really hinders things. Overall, the added content here is weak, and fails to fully supplement and/or complement the title.

Final Thoughts:

Since comedy and sense of humor are so personal as to be almost impossible to evaluate, individuals will have to decide for themselves whether *Puppets Who Kill* is hilarious or hackneyed. For this critic, the answer was simple. He would rather *Skip It* than recommend it. But since the effectiveness of wit is best determined independently, a firm rating of **Rent It** will be awarded. This is clearly a case of consumer consideration with a healthy case of 'caveat emptor'. If the title has you in stitches before you've watched a single episode, if the notion of noxious toys discussing masturbation, mass murder and other social malfeasance has you giggling in giddy, gratuitous delight, if the most basic bit of concurrence comedy channels your chuckles, you will definitely love this Canadian crack at craziness. Others, however, will realize how limited the premise is, and eventually grow bored of all the obvious attempts at outrageousness. Malignant moppets with potent potty mouths and clear criminal intent ought to be the height of bleak, black comedy. Yet for some reason, *Puppets Who Kill* just doesn't get it right. This isn't a missed opportunity. It's a misguided one.

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