

## DUMBSTRUCK Writer / Director's Letter

It all started with a toast at my wedding. My mother-in-law shocked our 200 friends and family when she held up her white-gloved hand and it began to speak. The white-gloved hand delivered a moving, heartfelt toast, with humor, charm and grace. I know how hard it is for her to speak in public, and to move the room to tears, with essentially a sock puppet, well, so began my adventure into the world of ventriloquism.

We followed her to the annual ventriloquist convention—the *only* ventriloquist convention in the world—in Ft. Mitchell, Kentucky. Close to 500 ventriloquists and their dummies meet, greet and share stories. The hotel looked like something out of medieval times, and the 'vent' museum was founded by a man named William Shakespeare Burger. This world had all the makings of a Christopher Guest film, but it was real. A world filled with hilarious and enchanting figures that begged to be captured on film.

I decided to focus on professional ventriloquists. Where did these people perform and how hard was it to make a living as a vent? Making a living in any form of entertainment is a challenge. I struggled for years as a writer before catching that life-changing break to write for THE WEST WING. But, making it as a ventriloquist? What does that even look like?

And how did one's family react when told you're going to pursue a career as a vent? I still remember when I told my family that I was moving to Hollywood. They were supportive, but reminded me on many occasions there's no shame in leaving Los Angeles and getting a real job. I related to Dylan, the 13 year-old, whose father wished he played football and rode motorcycles. I sympathized with Terry Fator, who after signing the largest deal in Las Vegas history, confessed that his father never told him he had any talent. And I felt for Kim, a former Miss Ohio beauty queen, whose mom often suggested it's time she had real kids instead of her 'puppet children.' Watching these characters soldier on in pursuit of their dreams, in response to and sometimes in spite of their families, became the real heart of the film.

We discovered that there is something pure about ventriloquism. Perhaps because of its prominence in the 50s, when performers like Edgar Bergen entertained the country on the *Ed Sullivan Show*. It takes you back to a simpler time, which is why we found performers in small towns like Mansfield, Ohio and Loomis, California. I worked hard with George Reasner, our DP, to make sure the look of the film captured this Americana.

However, something amazing happened as we continued filming. Terry Fator, who had been painting houses and mowing lawns in Corsicana, Texas to scrape by, won the million dollar grand prize on *America's Got Talent*. A few months later, I found myself filming Terry in the CEO's office at the Mirage Hotel, where he signed an unimaginable \$100,000,000 headliner deal. So much for ventriloquism only in small towns, and so much for barely scraping by.

Terry was just the tip of the iceberg. Every one of our ventriloquists went through some kind of cathartic, life-changing experience. Dumbstruck isn't really about ventriloquism. It's about five people who happen to be ventriloquists. They pursue their dreams, and they rely on their friends and family along the way. As the film shows, that dream is one of self-expression, of the deep-seated desire to have one's voice heard, to speak out and overcome struggle, even if one's medium is thought to be...well, a little wooden.

Mark Goffman