

DUMBSTRUCK

Written and directed by Mark Goffman

Produced by Lindsay Goffman

RT: 84 Minutes

Voted Best of the Fest - Palm Springs International Film Festival
Winner Best Documentary Film - Mountain Film Festival
Winner Audience Award - Friars Club Comedy Film Festival

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PRODUCTION NOTES

Synopsis:

At the annual Vent Haven Convention in Ft. Mitchell, Kentucky, ventriloquism capital of the world, director Mark Goffman discovers five extraordinary characters straight out of a Christopher Guest movie. But in this case the characters are real and their stories are deeply human and touching:

Kim, a former Miss Ohio beauty queen yearning for her big break; Dan, a thriving cruise ship performer whose wife may divorce him when he comes ashore; Dylan, an introverted 13-year-old with dreams of hitting the professional circuit; Wilma – all six-foot-five of her – a former security guard who brings her dummies to senior homes and Wal-Marts; and Terry, who struggled for decades as a small-time performer before winning America's Got Talent on his way to a \$100 million contract to headline the Mirage Casino in Las Vegas.

DUMBSTRUCK is the humorous and heartfelt story of these performers as they pursue their dreams of a career in puppetry. The film follows them as they take their acts across the United States, the Mexican Riviera, the Bahamas and Japan. It is filled with music, laughter, hopes and heartbreak. With its heart firmly planted on its polyester sleeve, Dumbstruck takes the American dream sideways and never loses its way.

The Idea:

The inspiration for this film began in Los Angeles, when Marlene Cohen put a sock on her hand and stood up to give a toast at her daughter Lindsay's wedding. The generally soft-spoken Cohen, a schoolteacher with a penchant for using ventriloquism to keep her students engaged, had the room enraptured. She had quite literally turned into a completely different person.

Lindsay and her new husband Mark were dumbstruck by her performance. It was then that Marlene told the Goffmans about an annual ventriloquist convention—in fact the *only* ventriloquist convention in the world—that she planned to attend in Ft. Mitchell, Kentucky, where close to 500 ventriloquists and their dummies meet, greet and share stories.

Mark and Lindsay accompanied Marlene to the convention and it proved to be unlike anything they could have imagined; a cornucopia of people from all walks of life with gesticulating wooden puppets and talking, singing and telling jokes in a dizzying range of voices. Producer Lindsay Goffman says, "There's a charm to every element of this community." Ventriloquists from all over the United States and even the globe had converged to fit a worldwide community into one building. The Goffmans had discovered a world that needed to be brought to the screen.

Mark, who has written for "The West Wing," "Law & Order: SVU", ran the writers room on "Studio 60 on the Sunset Strip," and is currently Executive Producer for "White Collar," had always wanted to work with Lindsay. Lindsay was then working at the Tannenbaum Company (producers of 2 ½ Men), and once the 2007 writers strike began, Mark had ample time on his hands.

Inspired both by documentaries and mockumentaries such as "King of Kong," "Spellbound," and "Best in Show," Mark and Lindsay began assembling their team. They enlisted the aid of George Reasner, an accomplished DP. Armed with a Panasonic XDX 200 HD camera, they landed in Fort Mitchell and

dove headfirst into the convention, talking to every attendee as well as any and everyone who knew anything about ventriloquism. Not only did they find five characters that they fell in love with, they had the fortune of catching these five ventriloquists at just the right time. Says writer/director Mark Goffman, "I think we captured the most unusual year in a very unusual art form. Every character that we followed had some kind of incredible life changing experience while we were shooting."

With the help of Doug Blush, editor of the crossword puzzle documentary "Wordplay," whom Mark had met as a fellow panelist on a documentary panel, they then put together a trailer. Mark also called upon the expertise of Sven Pape, with whom he had worked years before on a James Cameron behind-the-scenes documentary. Trailer completed, they approached former Paypal principle and "Thank You For Smoking" producer David O. Sacks, who had produced Mark's play "Me Too" several years before.

In a market where independent films, let alone documentaries, struggle to get released, Sacks proved immensely helpful. He and his team from Room 9 Entertainment (including consulting producer Daniel Brunt) provided valuable creative insights throughout production, as well as guidance with the sales and distribution plan for the film.

"I've known and admired Mark Goffman's work as a writer for years, and wanted to support his creative foray into directing," says David O. Sacks. "I couldn't be happier with what he has achieved with the film. Beyond watching these ventriloquists as artists and performers, we get to see them as people, both comedically and dramatically. This film also shows that if you follow your dreams, despite nearly insurmountable odds, even a ventriloquist can land a \$100,000,000 deal. The fact that Dumbstruck captured a success like this on film as it happened is truly remarkable, and riveting to watch as it unfolds."

The Goffmans did their own legwork and raised the necessary money on their own. Eventually Elon Musk, CEO of Tesla, Space X and executive producer of "Thank You For Smoking," signed on to executive produce Dumbstruck.

The Film:

The Goffmans knew they wanted to tell the stories of working ventriloquists: people working everyday jobs, practicing in small towns. Where did these people perform, how did their families react to their chosen careers, and how hard was it to make a living as a 'vent?' Goffman knew from personal experience that making a living in any form of entertainment is a challenge. He struggled for years as a writer, taking anything that came along before catching that life-changing break to get to write for THE WEST WING. But, making it as a ventriloquist? What does that even look like? He had to find out.

The Goffmans discovered that there is something pure about ventriloquism. Perhaps because of its prominence in the 50s and 60s, when entertainers like Edgar Bergen and Senior Wences were regulars on the Ed Sullivan show. It instantly takes you back to a simpler time. Ventriloquism wasn't in the big cities and big venues. It was in small towns like Mansfield, Ohio and Loomis, California. The performers prided themselves on creating family entertainment. He worked hard with George Reasner, a renown DP, to make sure the look of the film captured this Americana.

Almost uniformly, the subjects are misunderstood and encouraged to move beyond this hobby. Kim Yaeger's mom says, "Kim did the pageants and really loved it, but I thought it would kinda end, as she got older." These sentiments are echoed by Dylan's dad, who is an avid motorcycle rider. He tries

everything he can think of to encourage Dylan to race motorcycles, but Dylan's heart is in ventriloquism. Dylan's dad says, "With motorcycles, I can coach him. But when it comes to ventriloquism, I don't know anything about it." Even Terry Fator, who after signing the largest deal in Las Vegas history, confessed that his father never told him he had any talent. Watching these characters soldier on in pursuit of their dreams, in response to and sometimes in spite of their families, was the real heart of the film.

Goffman also spent time with Dan Horn, one of the few upper echelon ventriloquists to be hired to perform on a cruise ship. They initially thought Dan was their rock, the person who had everything together and on whose success and stability they could rely. This ended up being far from the case. "Three days from our first cruise with Dan, he called because his wife just emailed him wanting a divorce," Goffman said. Dan wasn't sure he'd be in any condition to talk on camera. But it turned out to be a cathartic experience for him. Horn says "When I got involved with this project I knew what I was getting into. I had no idea that my life would take such a devastating turn, but in all honesty, from an entertainment point of view, it made my story a lot more interesting to watch. After all, I am an entertainer—sometimes we really do suffer for our art."

Kim Yeager, Dan's understudy and mentee of sorts, struggled against the harsh realities of leaving her small town home in Ohio for the unforgiving world of cruise ship entertainment. At sea in her personal life as well, she has to deal with the expectations and protestations of her overbearing and disapproving mother who says, "I don't mean settle down, like she's wild or anything. I just mean, settle down, have kids, instead of her... puppet children."

Then there's Wilma, a 6'5 giant of a woman, who finds her puppets as points of solace and refuge. Wilma admits that she was banished from her family and forbidden to ever see her son again after his fifth birthday. But the vent community adores and accepts her exactly for who she is. When she faces eviction from her home, she turns to the only family she knows – her vent pals – and they come to her side.

The Shoot:

Shooting began in 2007, taking the crew from the Caribbean and the Mexican Riviera all the way to Osaka, Japan.

Shooting on the cruise ships proved quite a challenge. While their video cameras were allowed on board, their plans to shoot a documentary on the ship were not well received. The Goffmans discovered that pornographers often take advantage of cruise ships for low budget shoots. At the time the Goffmans were trying to film a ventriloquist act onboard a cruise ship, there was rumored to be a guerilla porn filmmaker on board shooting in one of the cabins. Kim, an aspiring cruise ship entertainer, is a former Miss Ohio runner-up and very attractive, and her voluptuous dummy Bertha, weren't helping the Goffmans' case. The cruise director threatened to leave the entire crew in the Bahamas if they didn't turn off their cameras. From that point on, filming on the ship became truly run and gun.

Another challenge was trying to shoot a full-length feature on a shoestring budget. Their precarious finances even reached a point where it was doubtful whether they would be able to afford an audio mix and music. However, inspired by the film, musician J.J. Blair, along with Oscar-nominated song-writer Bird York, wrote and performed the end-credit song, "Special Friend." Meanwhile composer Daniel Licht, who works full time on "Dexter," delivered an original score. The audio house Shapeshifter donated its engineer and gave room space at cost. MTI, the post production house, also gave worked at

a fraction of their rate to help finish the film.

The Goffmans shot about 300 hours of footage and had three extra characters who, despite their amazing stories, couldn't make it into the film due to length considerations. One of the most difficult parts of making the film was paring down their 300 hours to just under ninety minutes.

Ventriloquism's Resurgence in American Culture:

Even when Terry Fator finally got a break after landing a spot on "America's Got Talent," contest judge David Hasselhoff openly sneered when Terry and his puppets first appeared on the show, "Oh no, not a ventriloquist!" Seconds into Terry's stunning rendition of Etta James' "At Last," his celebrity critics were silenced. Terry soon won over the crowd and his judges with puppets such as Winston the impersonating turtle, who performed a dead-on imitation of Kermit the Frog singing "What a Wonderful World" and a more than passable Roy Orbison belting out "Crying (Over You)." Terry would go on to win "America's Got Talent," taking with him a jolt in posterity as well as a check for \$1 million.

The crew followed Terry on his return trip home to Corsicana, Texas, where he received the key to the city. From there they went with Terry to New York, where he appeared on Letterman. Then Oprah. Then a private performance for the President of the United States. Every day in Terry's life was proving more incredible than the last. When the hubbub seemed to finally be dying down, Mark received a cryptic call from Terry's manager in Las Vegas: "If you can show up at the Mirage at 11 a.m. I'm going to give you a pretty exceptional scene to shoot."

Inside the CEO's office at the Mirage the filmmakers got to watch Terry sign his first big contract. For \$100,000,000. Recalls Terry: "You read this in the paper. This happens to other people. This doesn't happen to me; this happens to the guy you read about... It was beyond my wildest dreams."

Terry's success hasn't been the only sign of ventriloquism's recent revival and return to prominence. Jeff Dunham, whose Youtube channel hits numbers in the hundreds of millions, recently saw his "A Very Special Christmas Special" become Comedy Central's highest-rated comedy special ever and sales of its DVD go quadruple platinum. Elsewhere, Jay Johnson, who starred three decades ago in the TV show "Soap" as a schizophrenic ventriloquist, recently won a Tony award for his autobiographical Broadway show, "The Two and Only." Meanwhile the yodeling ventriloquism act of Kim's second-coming, Miss Arkansas and Miss America runner-up Elyse Eady, earned her an appearance on Letterman during the show's "Ventriloquist Week."

It began as an ancient religious practice. Early ventriloquists—or *belly-talkers*—were believed to communicate with and channel the disembodied voices of dead spirits. Later generations would be condemned as practitioners of witchcraft. It wasn't until the twentieth century that the transition of ventriloquism from an occult act of trickery and deception to one of entertainment and comedic spectacle would be made. Vaudeville shows would be its evolutionary medium.

Ventriloquists like the "Grandfather of Modern-Day Ventriloquism," The Great Lester, and his puppet of choice, Frank Byron, Jr., drew in audiences in droves. The opening of the landmark Maher Ventriloquists Studios in 1934 stood as a testament to ventriloquism's newfangled status as an American art form. A decade later Edgar Bergen and his sidekick Charlie McCarthy were on the cover of *Time* magazine. As ventriloquism successfully expanded into the 1960s, with the acts of ventriloquists such as Señor Wences on "The Ed Sullivan Show" as well as Paul Winchell and Jimmy

Nelson on Saturday morning children's TV, there was little to indicate that ventriloquism's salad days were numbered.

The mid-1970s death of the TV variety show spelled the dearth of airtime for alternative performance artists. Suddenly relegated to live comedy shows, ventriloquists were further dismayed to find that these shows had become the grounds for stand-up comedians. Ventriloquism had fallen off the charts yet again.

And now it's back. Stronger than ever.

Despite its oscillating success in the capricious world of entertainment, ventriloquism soldiers on as a form of artistic expression, having long ago transcended its earlier status as a sideshow. This change is as indicative as ever in one of the few remaining seats of ventriloquism's fascinating history, the Vent Haven museum in Fort Mitchell, Kentucky, where the long deceased Great Lester's dummy, Frank Byron Jr., still resides and where the Goffmans unwittingly stumbled upon a slumbering cultural phenomenon.

The dream shared by the artists in this film resonated with audiences everywhere the film has screened, including at the Palm Springs International Film Festival, which named it "Best of Fest." In the words of Dan Horn, "The film is not really about ventriloquism; *Dumbstruck* is a film about 5 people who happen to be ventriloquists. It's not essential to have an interest in ventriloquism to enjoy this movie. I think the outside world loses sight of the fact that we go through the same rollercoaster ride as any other human beings pursuing a dream."

As the film shows, that dream is one of self-expression, of the deep-seated desire to have one's voice heard, and, as seen through the efforts of the ventriloquists in this film, to speak out and overcome struggle; even if one's medium is a little...well, wooden.

CREW

Mark Goffman, Director

DUMBSTRUCK is Mark's feature directorial debut, which was produced by his wife, Lindsay Goffman. Mark has worked primarily as a writer, having written for THE WEST WING, STUDIO 60, and LAW & ORDER: SVU. Currently, Mark is co-executive producer for the hit TV series WHITE COLLAR, and writing a pilot for CBS called D.C. LAW, about a high profile law firm in Washington, D.C. Mark's play, ME TOO, from the producer of THANK YOU FOR SMOKING, premiered at the Stella Adler Theater in Hollywood, and has had subsequent runs in other parts of the country. He is a graduate of Emory University and has a masters from Harvard's Kennedy School of Government. www.dumbstruckthemovie.com.

Lindsay Goffman, Producer

Lindsay Goffman is a development executive at Fremantle Media (producers of AMERICAN IDOL and THE PRICE IS RIGHT). Prior to this position, she worked as a development coordinator for the Tannenbaum Company (producers of 2 ½ MEN), in reality television at UPN (AMERICA'S NEXT TOP MODEL), and at the talent agency, ICM.

CAST

Terry Fator

There is no denying that Terry Fator is the most successful ventriloquist in the world – since winning “America’s Got Talent,” he’s played sold-out shows all over the country and now he has a staggering \$100,000,000 contract at Las Vegas’ Mirage Hotel. But this level of success wasn’t always the case for The Human Jukebox. It took Fator 22 years of languishing in obscurity before he got his big break and found himself playing for the likes of the President of the United States and making millions.

www.terryfator.com

Dan Horn

Dan Horn is a venerable ventriloquist – not to mention the idol of many aspiring ‘vents’ – who has been entertaining audiences for nearly three decades. With a rich history in performing and a long list of television credits that includes A&E’s EVENING AT THE IMPROV and the LATE SHOW WITH DAVID LETTERMAN, Dan appears to be at the top of his game. But when his wife of 25 years drops the ‘d-word,’ Dan must wrestle with staying in his coveted gig at sea or attempting to find work as a ventriloquist in Arizona.

<http://www.danhorn.com/new/Home.htm>

Wilma Swartz

A much-loved member of the vent community, Wilma Swartz uses a family of puppets to entertain children of all ages. Eccentric and loveable, this six-foot-five lady turns heads wherever she goes – especially in a local Wal-Mart when she takes her favorite puppet clothes shopping. When faced with the threat of eviction, Wilma calls on the aid of her vent family and is blown away by the outcome.

www.wilmapuppets.com

Kim Yeager

Kim Yeager is a former beauty queen with a passion for dummies. And while Kim has built a career on entertaining children with her talents, she wants to take it to the next level and become a cruise ship entertainer. When it looks like she may have the chance to audition for a gig on a ship, Kim realizes that the opportunity would take her far away from her Mansfield, Ohio home – not to mention her little dog with special needs.

www.kimberlyyeager.com

Dylan Burdette

Dylan is a shy teenager living in rural Kentucky who has wanted to be a professional ventriloquist since he was five (much to his family’s bafflement). While other kids his age might be concerned about gym class or an algebra test, this 13-year-old is more worried about talking without moving his mouth. A tenacious performer, Dylan shelves his shyness to audition for professional gigs and realizes one of his dreams when he performs at Vent Haven for Terry Fator.

CAST AND CREDITS

Exec Producer

Elon Musk

Producer

Lindsay Goffman

Director

Mark Goffman

Writer

Mark Goffman

Editors

Sven Pape

Doug Blush

Alyssa Clark

Director of Photography

George Reasner

Composer

Daniel Licht

“Special Friend” performed by Bird York written and produced by Bird York and J. J. Blair

Courtesy of Blissed Out Records

Co-Producer

George Reasner

Consulting Producers

David O. Sacks (Thank You for Smoking)

Daniel Brunt

Associate Producers

Gary Cohen

Hal Long

Additional Editors

Tina Imahara

Farah Khalid

Reynier Molenaar

Miranda Yousef

Assistant Editors

David Bell

Adi Cabigting

Alex Calleros

Jeff Orgil

Dustin Slaughter
Molly Marnon
Ian Spohr
Jennifer Taylor
Michael Weinreich

Camera Operators

Hal Long
Rory King
Brian Hoodenpyle
Paul Mayne
Ron Songer
Ian Spohr
Scott Connelly
Andrew Russo
Jonathan Stevens
Rob Edgecomb

Audio

Micah Bloomberg
Sharon Frye
Ken Petrosky
Chris Bell
Lisa Gillespie
Troy Kurtz
Mitch Hill
David Lankton
Scott Wildfong

Cast

Terry Fator
Melinda Fator
Debi Fator
Marie Fator Sly
David Hasselhoff
Sharon Osbourne
Piers Morgan
Jerry Springer
Darrell Johnson
Michael Ruk
Sissy Johnson
John McEntee
Scott Sibella
Rick Kerns
Kim Yeager
Jane Risner
Dylan Burdette
Jennifer Burdette
Barry Burdette

Dave Willacker
Dan Horn
Wilma Swartz
Bob Ashman
Maria Ashman
Terry L. Johns
Mark Anthony Ciarlante
Tom Ladshaw
Mark Wade
Annie Roberts
Lisa Sweasy
Bob Rumba

Legal

PJ Shapiro
Jake Lager

Clearance

Susan Ricketts
Amy Goodfriend

Music Clearance Services Provided by Kathleen Merrill – Parker Music Group

Interns

Beatriz Manela
Susan Rolfe
Andy Sweat
Ryan Fung
Josh Morrison
Ryan Burkhard
Sarah Ricard
Peter Grant
Claire Sullivan-Tailyour
Max Littman

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Dave Willacker and Dave's Portable Circus
John McEntee and TEI Entertainment
Tom Ladshaw
Jesec Griffin
Luis Lopez
Kevin Bleyer
Nate Corddry

Joel Goffman, our first investor
David Roemer
Allison Kiessling
David O. Sacks
Daniel Brunt
Bird York and J.J. Blair
Suzanne Lindbergh and Apple
Grace Ledding

Dedicated to Marlene Cohen and all her friends -- Firedog, Gertie the Birdie, Weezer, Flo, and Shy Pig.