

by Bob Abdou

Imagine a place offering puppets that are manufactured by the thousands or custom-made from your design.

Imagine a client list of famous celebrities like Jay Johnson or Terry Fator.

Imagine information for the taking on puppet conferences, puppetmakers, comedy writers, Christian puppetry and magic shops around the world.

Imagine a daily on-line puppetry chat at 4PM pacific time every day.

Imagine a full puppet TV studio and recording studio for puppet routines.

Imagine all the latest technology of puppetmaking to give your show that "wow" factor.

You don't have to imagine all of these things. All of this and more can be easily found at www.axtell.com and is brought to you by one man, his family and company that lives by the motto "You make a living by what you get; you make a life by what you give."

Meet Steve Axtell, puppeteer, ventriloquist, puppetbuilder, husband, father, president and creator of a company called "Axtell Expressions".

When Steve was six years old, he watched his mother at work on her sewing machine. He asked her to sew something for him – a "little man." But instead of doing it for him, she insisted on teaching him to do it himself. When he had finally hand-stitched and stuffed the little man doll, Steve discovered that he could put his hand inside the body and make it move. The very first Axtell puppet had been created.

Like many people growing up in the '60s and '70s, Steve was captivated by the creativity of Jim Henson's puppets on *Sesame Street*. Steve created puppets modeled after the characters of *Sesame Street* and Steve's parents, Catherine and Rev. Ronald Axtell, sent a picture of Steve with his puppets to Jim Henson. Imitation might be the best form of flattery, but the Henson company said (nicely) that Steve should develop his own style instead of copying Henson's. Steve took his hero's advice to heart and immediately begin creating his own characters for a newer puppet image.

In the 1970s, Steve began to perform a one-man show with his menagerie which included a bird puppet (with which he created the patented bird arm illusion). In the beginning, Steve primarily performed using music and standing behind an elaborate stage. Later, Steve would meet ventriloquist Mark Wade and realize that performing in front of the stage had its benefits too. He also began adding magic to his shows.



The photo sent to Jim Henson by Steve's mother



Steve with his new creations, at about age 17

Steve sold his first puppet to a professional ventriloquist. It was an orange furry fox puppet (he would love to know if it still exists today!) And with that, Steve realized that there was a need for his gift of creating puppets as well as performing with them.

During a family vacation to Disney World, Steve saw some latex masks which were sold at the magic store. He decided to try and combine the fur, which he was already using, with the latex. With the help of his high school teacher Charles Castro (who was also a magician) Steve began to develop the science and process of working with latex that would give Axtell puppets their signature look. Is it a coincidence that the letters of Steve's last name, Axtell, can be rearranged to spell L-A-T-E-X? Or maybe it was fate?! (The extra 'L' could stand for 'Love', 'Learning' or 'Laughter', all things that Axtell puppets bring to their audiences!)

In 1980, Steve married Suzi and he had to make a decision that might be made by everyone in the creative arts: "Do I want to travel and be away from my wife or do I want to start a family?" The decision was easy for him, he would raise a family and have a fulltime job and create puppets on the side. Steve began working as a psychiatric technician in the California State Hospital but maintained his association



Newer characters created by a young Steve using fur and latex with other puppetmakers and performers.

The first day Steve and his wife started at a new church in central California, a couple invited them to their house for lunch. Coincidentally, (or was it divine intervention?) the man turned out to be Craig Lovik, a man whose work had inspired Steve over the years! Craig was the creator of many of the Maher Vent figures and latex puppets. That chance meeting turned into a lasting friendship and professional relationship. Together Craig and Steve would work on designing characters and shared in projects with toy companies over the years. Steve also took a class on sculpting and modeling puppet faces from Tony Bulone, who created the first Barbie Doll. They would later work together on creations for the Axtell line.

Eventually, Steve and Suzi were inspired to act on their dream of beginning their own puppet company and they began manufacturing puppets in their garage on weekends. They would clear space in a room to mix chemicals or sew fur or open a window to bring in a hose for water. It was a tight fit, but the Axtell company was now officially in business. Early creations like the Storyteller (modeled after a family member) and Bongo the Gorilla still sell well today and were created in their garage / workshop over the same weekend 25 years ago. Today, Suzi and their four children are still involved with the family business.

The company that formed in the garage eventually moved to a giant warehouse and



Jose Cruz, Products manager for Axtell Expressions working on a puppet project.

workshop in Ventura, California and is now called "Axtell Expressions." Steve explains the meaning behind the company name, "It's both my 'creative expressions' (sculpture, artwork, painting, music, design, voice over, etc.) and the 'expressions' of our latex characters. They are not just static faces, but they have built-in expressions".

If you were fortunate enough to save any advertising flyers from the early days of Axtell Expressions, you would see the gradual addition of new puppets, props and magic being added to their catalogue every year. No matter what your style of show, there is an Axtell puppet to fit any bill. Steve notes that Axtell Expression puppets, "have helped autistic children speak for the first time and are often used to share the good news of Jesus in churches around the world." Steve says this is what makes him and the staff of Axtell the most proud: having a positive influence in people's lives.

During the '90s the popularity of Axtell puppets kept growing and has never stopped. Promoting the business at conventions and through individual sales people has kept the name Axtell out in the performing world and staying on the cutting edge of invention has kept performers coming back to Axtell again and again.



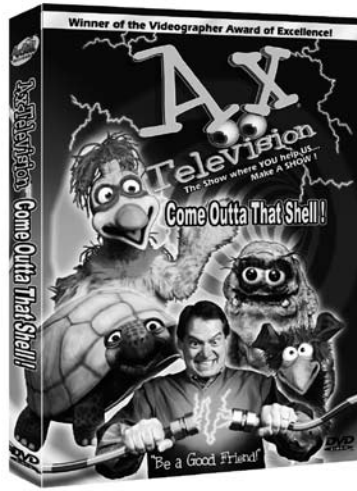
A convention photo of Axtell puppeteers.

Not satisfied with only standard puppets, Steve has brought onto the scene more intricate creations like humanette puppets, the remote control drawing board, and magic tricks and puppet props. And if you have an idea for a special puppet, Axtell Expressions will help you create it.

A few years ago, the famous Japanese ventriloquist, Ikkokudo, requested a Mother Alien body puppet. He wears the puppet in front of him and it has a backpack (which creates the illusion that Ikkokudo is being carried on her back), then she carries a box with two baby aliens. Everything was operated by his two hands on cables and headsticks. Axtell Expressions is in business to make puppet design a reality.



In 2004 Axtell embarked on an exciting new project and created a television show – *Axtlevision* which was created in Axtell Expression's own TV studio. The movie involves a crew of kids in the detailed process of making a fully-featured short puppet movie. It details everything about making a film – from the design and creation of the puppets to the editing and narration of the movie. Steve says that *Axtlevision* is now a huge part of the Axtell business. It has won 11 awards as a production including *Unima*, *Parent's Choice Award* and *Parent's Magazine Award*.



And in 2008, Steve is going where very few puppetmakers have gone: robotic puppetry. Axtell Expressions is developing a new wave of technology with Ron Palmer, a 40-year veteran of robotics. The automation of a character without a puppeteer using real-time remote control has been a part of puppetry for many years, but it was only available to places with lots of money like Disney. Axtell's Hands-Free Puppets™ uses mp3 and remote control technology without the need of a computer. This brings the cost down and makes the puppets accessible to many performers.



Programming the animatronic Toucan . Greg Jackson, Axtell Studio Producer Ron Palmer, Robotics Engineer

The first two creations available to the public are a toucan bird and a baby chimp. Steve doesn't think that robotics will overtake simple puppetry though. His vision for the future is for every performer to have an Axtell puppet on one hand and a remote control device in the other.

Today, Axtell characters are used on Broadway by Jay Johnson, in *The Two and Only* (which won a Tony award) and you can see Terry Fator (winner of *America's Got Talent*) perform with a custom made Axtell Turtle.

On television you might see Kevin Johnson performing with an Axtell on the *David Letterman Show* and in the movies you can see Axtell puppets in *The Planet of the Apes* or promoting the movie *Madagascar* with the voices of David Schwimmer, Chris Rock, Jada Pinkett Smith and Ben Stiller.



Jay Johnson and an Axtell buzzard from the Tony award winning Broadway show, *The Two and Only*



Steve sculpting Terry Fator's new "Winston the Impersonating Turtle" - Terry is the winner of "America's Got Talent" and now headlining in Las Vegas at his own theatre



Steve's greatest accomplishments – marrying Suzi and raising 4 great children, Ryan, Jessika, Tyler and Melody

Axtell Expressions is now celebrating 25 years in the puppet making business. From a six year old boy with small hand puppet – to all that Steve has accomplished so far in his lifetime (with more surprises to come) can be summed up in one word – "Excellent".

Photos provided by Steve Axtell and Bob Abdou. Jay Johnson photo by Carol Rosenberg. More Axtell in the Gallery.

Bob Abdou, is Vice President of the Houston Puppetry Guild and a full time ventriloquist/ puppeteer from Austin, Texas. Check out www.mrpuppet.com to view videos and photos of Axtell puppets in his shows.

