

Puppet dictator

JEFF DUNHAM

e Sun., Sept. 7, 7 p.m.
Ryan Center, University of
Rhode Island, Kingston

Tickets \$43
(401) 331-2211
www.ticketmaster.com

BY MATT KEEFER

Check out the abnormal growth on Jeff Dunham's hand. You might notice it's less malignant and more indignant, not cancer but certainly a blight on society, and that the excrescence sprouts gray hair and strange noises. And its name is Walter.

This grumpy and opinionated Vietnam vet has been married for 48 years, which is incredible considering his creator, Dunham, is only 46. The Dallas-born ventriloquist has two stand-up specials on Comedy Central, with a "Very Special Christmas Special" slated to air Nov. 16. But more importantly, he performs at the Ryan Center at URI's Kingston Campus Sept. 7.

At the age when most kids are enthused with eating paste, Dunham turned away from imbibing Elmer's and leaned toward a career that would creatively use glue at the age of 8. In a recent e-mail interview, Dunham recalls his first ventriloquist performance:

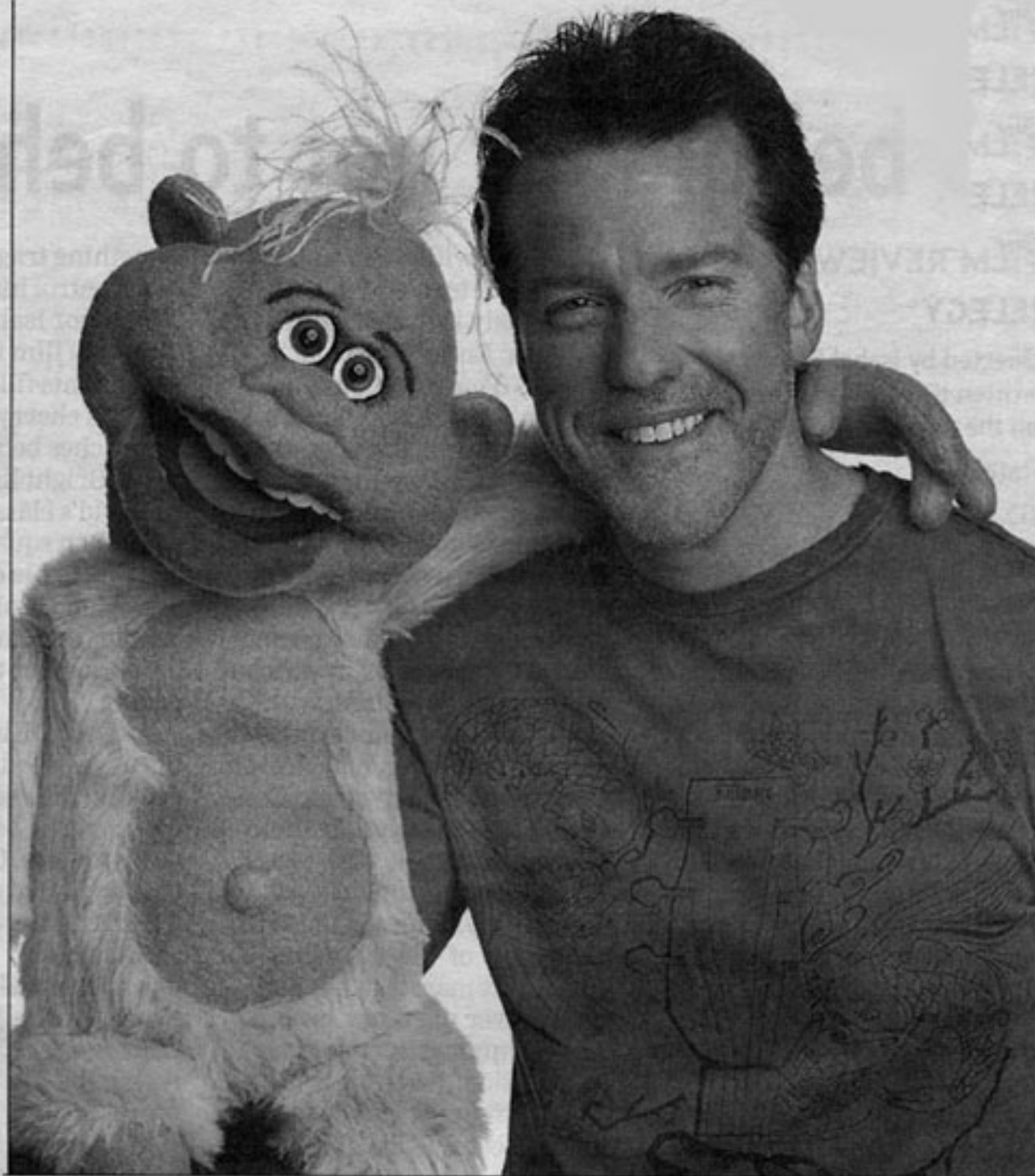
"My first performance was a book report on Hansel and Gretel. I did about 30 seconds on the book, then about 10 minutes picking on my classmates, our teacher, and the school."

The father of three shows how far he has come from those juvenile days. "That's pretty much the formula I have for shows now: give the audience a few minutes of meaningful stuff, then make fun of everyone and everything for an hour or two."

Dunham started comedy clubs while he was a freshman in college, using Walter and Peanut, his older and especially developed characters. "The inspiration for Walter came from two folks: a close friend's father (who) was even named Walter (and) Betty Davis when she was on with Carson for the last time. She spoke her mind and didn't give a rip what anyone thought about her." Peanut is more, well, what you get when you shoot a gorilla-bellied Muppet full of caffeine and sugar shots and lock him in a suitcase for a week.

Between his two Comedy Central specials, Dunham has seven puppets, including Jose Jalapeño, a pepper on a stick, and Achmed the Dead Terrorist. His characters aren't always as politically correct as they could be, but hearing about airline peanuts and weather forecasters wouldn't be quite as funny.

Though he wasn't at liberty to discuss puppets of new, he gave opinions on



Little known trivia: Between building puppets, Jeff Dunham, right, constructs full-sized helicopters at the behest of Peanut, left. PHOTO BY RICHARD MCLAREN

puppets of old. "My favorite Muppet was Beaker. As for what I would like as a Muppet, I haven't a clue!" Might we suggest a new project?

Matt Keefer is a life-sized radio-controlled puppet operated by John Hodgman. It might explain his fear of werewolves and Macs.