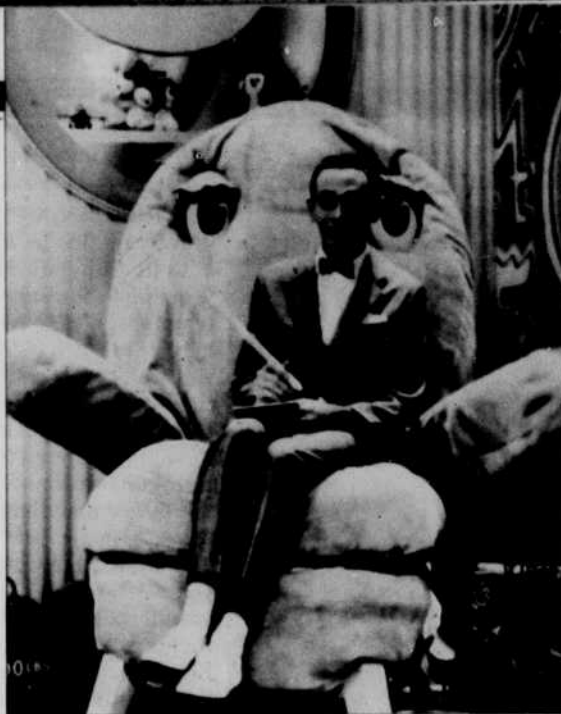


square-dance footage for yet another scene.

The frenetic energy that goes into the making of "Pee-wee's Playhouse" comes out in the final result. Skits, bits and gags explode across the screen—some of them featuring Pee-wee (a.k.a. actor Paul Reubens) and other live actors and many of them employing an astonishing range of animation and special effects. One sequence begins with Pee-wee getting a call on his "picture phone." A puppet quizmaster asks, "Why do cows wear bells?" Stumped, Pee-wee races across the playhouse floor to ask a life-size cow puppet. When she gives him the right answer—"Because their horns don't work"—Pee-wee wins a Hawaiian dinner. This prompts him to daydream about surfing, and we see his image "hang 10" while superimposed on stock footage. And this brief sequence is sandwiched among clay-animation short films, a classic cartoon, shtik by a demented marionette and much, much more.

"Each show," says Stephen Johnson, "is like a crazy-quilt pattern. Hopefully, when you stand back, you can see the whole picture." Some shows have a theme, like the rainy day in which the "Playhouse" gang must entertain themselves indoors. But more often the show hurtles from skit to feature to scene. "Each show is jam-packed," says Johnson, who describes his job as "cre-



JOHN DUKE KISCH

'It's his playhouse': Pee-wee Herman on the set

ating the environment that allows Pee-wee to be Pee-wee. It's his playhouse and his world, and he has to be comfortable in it."

Organizing the program—where both animate and inanimate objects move and talk—seems mind-boggling, if not impossible. But Johnson is used to combining live

action and animation. He co-directed (with David Byrne) the Talking Heads video for "Road to Nowhere" and also directed Peter Gabriel's "Sledgehammer" video.

Thanks to his video work and the "Playhouse," Johnson is getting a lot of offers from rock stars (Gabriel again) and film companies (Warner Bros. wants a meeting). But Johnson doesn't have time: "When we were shooting the live stuff, I was either in bed or directing. Now I'm either sleeping or in the editing room." And even if he does sag a little here and there—neatly dressed in a white shirt, buttoned to the top, and black jeans, but with a few strands of his brown ponytail coming loose—Johnson can't afford to collapse. He's got three more production sites to

visit this afternoon—to see composers, sound mixers, more video artists and editors. He's got two days to finish a show and a lot of the crazy-quilt pieces to stitch together. Stephen Johnson pops a wild-cherry Life Saver into his mouth and moves on.

RON GIVENS

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