GCSE

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FRIDAY, 10 JUNE 2022 – MORNING

ENGLISH LANGUAGE – Component 2

19th and 21st Century Non-Fiction Reading and Transactional/Persuasive Writing

Resource Material for use with Section A

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Knockout Punch

Mark Poulton's Punch and Judy puppet show entertains the crowds every summer on Weymouth seafront. He calls it his dream job, even though times are harder now. Reporter Craig Arnott met up with him.

It's Tuesday morning on Weymouth seafront and the sky is thick with grey clouds. I have only strolled 50 yards when I bump into Weymouth's Mr Punch and Judy man, Mark Poulton, who is one of just three licensed Punch and Judy performers left in the UK. We'd met briefly the night before when I watched his Monday evening show down on the beach. For the rest of the week, his shows run four or five times daily throughout the summer.



As it threatens to rain, we dip into a café where he tells me it's his dream job, the only one he had ever wanted since watching a Punch and Judy show with his mother as a 5-year-old child. "We came here for a week's holiday," he explains. "I watched every performance that week. As soon as I got home, I transformed my teddies into puppets and set up my own show in the back garden." When he was just 16 he secured his first summer season at Llandudno, before taking his show all over the country, and then being invited to perform on Weymouth's sands in 2005.

He's a master of his craft, having taught himself to carve his wooden puppets and design and make their costumes. He says that Weymouth has had a Punch and Judy show since 1880, making it an important part of the town's history. "And I'm now a part of the town's history and tradition too. During the summer I draw big crowds," he tells me proudly. "In fact, many people tell me they come to Weymouth purely to see the rare sight of a Punch and Judy show still being performed on the beach." He looks up and smiles, a man in love with his work and with Weymouth. "It's the perfect home for Punch and Judy shows," he says. "With its safe, sandy beach people are happy to come and sit on the sand, but there are always people up on the seafront enjoying the show too."

Now 48 years old, Mark knows that being Weymouth's Punch and Judy man won't make him rich but that doesn't put him off. "I love the thrill of the work and living off your wits. You're constantly pushing to find new routines that will attract an audience." His seaside show is one of the last to rely on audiences giving a donation when his assistant goes around with the collecting box.

Although his shows often draw audiences of over 200, he tells me that in 2016 he had threatened to end his beach performances because of the poor behaviour of some children. "Obviously I encourage their participation in the show, and I want them to shout and yell, but I had kids throwing stones at the show and the parents just sat there and let them do it. I even had adults sunbathing in front of the show, so people who wanted to watch couldn't sit there. They refused to pay to watch the show and some of the children were trying to deliberately stop the show by banging on the show booth. I just became fed up and at the time it kind of destroyed my faith in humanity. I just got a load of verbal abuse from the kids and their parents did nothing." Fortunately for Weymouth, when he announced he might stop performing, he was overwhelmed with messages of support and he decided to continue.

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Despite his obvious passion for keeping the tradition of Punch and Judy alive, in recent years it has been hard for Mark to cover his costs and make a living, “I make a little bit of extra money from selling souvenir key rings after the performances but it’s never enough.” This year he successfully appealed for donations on a Facebook crowdfunding page to raise money, and quickly raised enough to cover his expenses.

Outside the café, darker clouds are beginning to gather as his first performance of the day approaches. “Sometimes people are glad of something to watch when it’s raining,” he says, “and I’m always happy to do the shows, come rain or shine.”

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