

Interview



The Art of the Masquerade MC *Jennifer Wylie** *with Phil Foglio*



A masquerade director interviews a popular masquerade MC about his role, and his experiences working with masquerade contestants.

I have been a huge fan of the comic *Girl Genius*, written by Phil and Kaja Folio. It's a gaslamp fantasy that picked up steam when it went from an initial small print run to one of the most popular webcomics on the internet. Needless to say, I was majorly enthusiastic when asked to write an article about Phil and Kaja's contribution to the costuming community as a result of their success.

Over the past couple of years, Phil has been the Master of Ceremonies of events such as San Diego ComicCon, WorldCon, and WonderCon, and so I caught up with him to find out what he enjoys about his role when it comes to interacting with costumers on stage.

What initially got you interested in public speaking?

Both my wife, Kaja, and myself have been active on the stage. I did improv comedy off and on for over fifteen years, and Kaja did Commedia Del Arte. We were active in science fiction fandom, and for a while were art show auctioneers. Public speaking is easy.

How did you become a part of the Masquerade for San Diego ComicCon and WonderCon?

The Masquerade Director, Martin Jaquish, asked us if we wanted to do it. I'm not sure where he saw us, but he seemed pretty sure we could emcee, and I guess he was right. This'll be our 16th year.

Have you been the MC for other Masquerade events?

Sadly, no. I was asked by Martin to emcee the masquerade at Loscon 4 (I think), the most recent WorldCon in Los Angeles, which he was running, but since that was working with Martin and his usual excellent crew, I don't really feel it was a different show, though it was a different audience. We'd certainly enjoy doing more emcee work, but no one has asked.

What was that like in comparison to SDCC/WC?

Well, like I said, I was working with the same great support crew. Since it was a

new venue, there were more technical problems than usual, but certainly nothing that affected the overall show, and keeping things moving on stage if something went wrong was why they had me there.

Please tell me about some of the coolest costumes you've seen on stage.

Good Lord- there've been so many. Let's see...there are the costumes where they just got everything perfect. There was this guy who had a Godzilla costume that was spot on, and I remember an Alien costume that was incredibly creepy to have moving around a few feet away from us.

Group costumes that are well done, well rehearsed and original stand out. There was a group at San Diego in 2006 that did "Dancing With Celebrities From the Stars" that we talked about for days (watch their performance on [YouTube](#)).



Last year at San Diego there was a group that did a perfect tableau of Alphonse Mucha's *The Seasons*. There are a lot of costumes with extraordinary delicacy and beauty, but I tend to remember the stuff that made me laugh.

What's the toughest part of being an MC while a contestant is on stage during a Masquerade?

The hardest part is doing nothing. When a contestant is on the stage, they should be the focus of attention. It's hard not to react to some costumes. Sometimes they're extraordinarily good, and sometimes they're excruciatingly bad, but ideally I can't allow myself to react in a way that might detract from them.



Photo by [Jocie SF](#), WonderCon 2008

What are some tactics you employ when there is a technical hiccup?

I tell jokes. I have a prepared list of them in my coat pocket. Only once were there so many technical glitches that I ran

out of jokes. In that instance, I sang a folk song (Zero-G polka) that I'd learned close to 30 years ago. That'll teach them.

Have you ever had to deal with really bad hecklers in an audience?

Yes. The San Diego crowd likes to think of itself as "The World's Worst Audience" (questionable, since they're not drunk bikers with guns, but it gives them a thrill). The way we deal with this is by establishing early in the proceedings that I have nowhere else to go that evening, and will cheerfully stand there ALL NIGHT LONG unless we get silence. We also allow the audience to "blow off steam" by letting them call out the contestant's number.

What's your favorite part of MC'ing a Masquerade?

When I get to tell the audience one of my jokes.

Thank you, Phil, for your time! Stay tuned for more in the next issue of *The Virtual Costumer*, as I talk to Phil about how he and Kaja put their brains together to create the costuming in the *Girl Genius* world.

Jennifer Wylie is a sci-fi/fantasy costumer who is a fan of a number of genres, including Girl Genius and Dr. Who. She has been the masquerade director for Silicon, and will be masquerade co-director for Gallifrey 2010.



Photo by [Jim Mourgos](#), WonderCon 2009

Phil Foglio is a Hugo-award winning cartoonist and comic book artist, best known for his humorous science fiction and fantasy work. With his wife, Kaja, he created the Gaslamp "Girl Genius" series. Visit his [Studio Foglio](#) web site.