

8. "It's like Greek Theater" -- An Interview with Max Riffner

Max Riffner started working as a professional web designer in 1996 while studying graphic design in college. After graduating in 1999, Riffner kept working as a web designer for several firms while working on comics at night.

Riffner's mini-comic, *Quick Step*, won the Isotope Award for Excellence in Mini-Comics in 2007. In the following years, Riffner started webcomic *Drunk Elephant Comics*. Riffner also started to work with writer Kevin Church on *Lydia* and *Signs and Meanings*. Riffner graduated with a Masters of Fine Arts in Cartooning from the Center for Cartoon Studies in Vermont in 2013. Riffner has been published by Fantagraphics, *Spongebob Comics*, *Monkeybrain*, *Activate*, and *Markosia*, along with self-publishing mini-comics and webcomics for the last 14 years.

What is your story with professional wrestling?

The Crippler's Son was published digitally in 2014. I get quite a bit of fan mail from it now, still,

I conceived of it, from a interview I read with Mad Dog Vachon,¹ in which he was breaking Kayfabe. I was in my early to mid twenties, and it blew my mind. I hadn't been into wrestling at that point for about 10-15 years, pretty much since I was a kid. Once you figured out it was fake, it kind of felt like the betrayal of Santa Claus, so I didn't pay attention to it. But then, after reading this interview, I became fascinated with the art form again

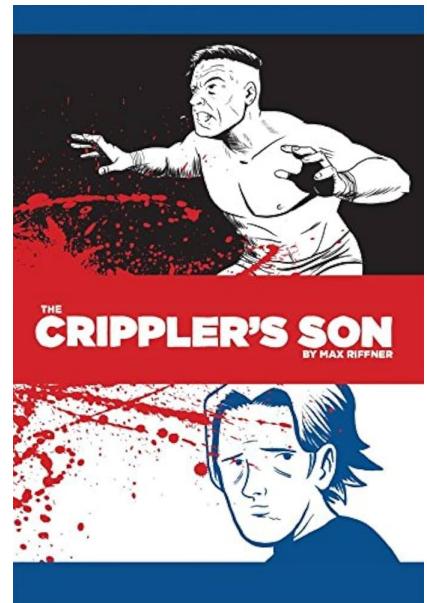
I was affiliated with this group of cartoonists in the Midwest, Shock Trauma Studios, which was mainly led by Andy Parks and Phil Hester and they were doing their awesome *Green Arrow* run at the time. Everyone in that group loved wrestling, and one of them was doing a wrestling book called *Holy Terror* (by Jason Caskey and Phil Hester).

You mention Mad Dog. What was your era in professional wrestling?

So my era would have been definitely like WWF, 1980s. I caught some of the stuff before Hogan really got into his heyday. So I definitely remember the Sheik being the Champ transitionally. And then I remember just being like just blown away by Hogan.

I don't remember watching Mad Dog Vachon, but I knew who he was, because he's he's lived in Omaha, and he was such a character that everybody knew who he was.

A friend's dad knew Mad Dog Vachon because they all, like all the wrestlers, would go to this bar downtown in Omaha that was near the civic auditorium. (I can't remember the name of the bar.) His dad happened to drink there, and so he got to know a lot of the wrestlers, and the wrestlers got to know the community. They'd get done with the show. They'd go get a drink at this bar, and then they'd hit the road.



1. Joseph Maurice Régis Vachon (September 14, 1929 – November 21, 2013) was a Canadian professional wrestler, best known by his ring name Mad Dog Vachon.

The *Omaha World Herald* published an interview with him towards the end of his life, and he just kind of talked. He was just kind of a sweet old man. Now, when you hear stories about him on the road, that guy was nuts. It's lucky he lived as long as he did.

This interview reinvented you to think about wrestling as a topic for your own creative work?

Absolutely — it really sparked something within me. But it took over 10 years for me to get to *The Crippler's Son*. I kept trying to make it something that it shouldn't be. The story began more of like your generic adventure story, and it took me a long time and a lot more maturity to figure out that wrestling can be its own thing, and it can be its own story. I wanted to delve into that with *The Crippler's Son*.

It usually take over 10 years for me to actually commit to paper. The one I'm doing right now, I started as a Mini comic in 2013. Just a couple of years ago, I realized that I know exactly what I'm doing now, so I know know what I want to say. It's been that way consistently for me. It usually takes about 10 years to get something down because I just keep coming at the story from every different angle.

As I grew more into wrestling fandom as an adult, I wanted to do right by it and treat it with respect. And even now, though like now that I have so much more wrestling knowledge, I wish I could go back and do it. But I'm proud of the book. I'm happy that it has found fans and has lasted as long as it has with digital. I keep getting people who find it and keep reaching out to me to message me about it. So that's always nice.

I often remind people that wrestling is the most popular form of American theater.

I don't disagree. I completely agree with that.

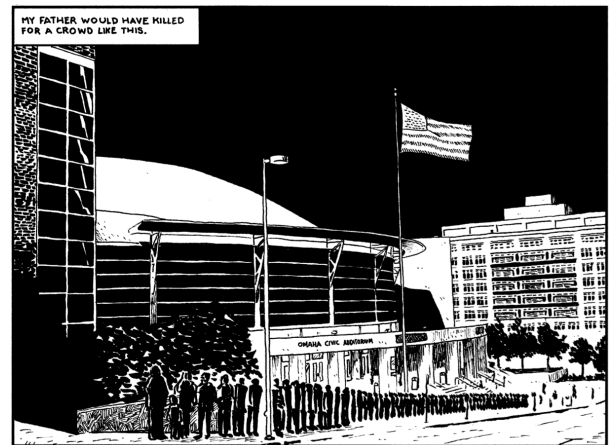
Do you find that the storytelling in wrestling has inflected any of your own ideas of what makes for a good story?

100%. When you're in the ring, (I've never been in the ring, but other wrestlers have said that) it's like Greek theater — that you really have to over-emote. That's something weirdly that tied in with my work. I wasn't emoting enough, or I wasn't making reveals as obvious as I should be. At the Center for Comics Studies, the 2 main teachers that I was working with were Steve Bisette² and Jason Lutes³. They really worked me into being a little bit more obvious. That has really affected my work, making sure that the audience understands what's actually happening.

As a cartoonist, I'm the director and also the actor sort of making sure that those feelings are conveyed in the artwork. That's that's definitely a lesson I took from wrestling.

It's interesting to hear you talk about that, because my head immediately went to Chris Ware. Chris Ware doesn't seem obvious. But in fact, he is obvious, right?

He's a master at it.



2. Stephen R. Bisette, a professional cartoonist, is best known for his collaboration with writer Alan Moore and inker John Totleben on DC Comics' "Saga of the Swamp Thing" from 1983-87. His artwork has appeared in "Heavy Metal," "Epic Illustrated," "Bizarre Adventures," "Weird Worlds" and many others.
3. Jason Lutes is an American comics creator, best-known for his "Berlin" series, which he wrote and drew over 22 years.

After I released *Crippler*, I became a creative director at a digital marketing agency locally. Then, I unexpectedly had heart surgery. I was in my mid thirties at that point, and I discovered that I had a bicuspid aortic valve. I just happened to go to the doctor for strep throat. I didn't see my usual doctor, and they asked, "How long have you had the heart murmur?"

"I don't have a heart murmur."

"You've got a heart murmur. You need to go to the ER."

Within a year, I had open heart surgery, and that kind of took me out for a couple years. Just kind of dealing with my health. When you have open heart surgery, something happens with your brain because your brain knows that your heart stopped because they have to stop it to work. You go through this weird depression for a couple of years. And I've read other artists have dealt with it; Larry McMurtry talked about it quite a bit.

In those years, I did a couple of projects for *Spongebob Comics*.

My current project is called *See You in Hell*, and it's a workplace comedy set in Hell. I'm having a lot of fun with that.

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I think this is like the best time for wrestling. There's just so much good stuff available. I love AEW. I love WWE I love. I was a big fan of NWA, Ring of Honor. GCW, I've checked out. TNA is one that I keep meaning to look more into. I don't have any more bandwidth. There's so much stuff to watch.

I have a friend that's a documentary filmmaker, also into wrestling, and he'll send me really old WCW, or matches with Stone Cold and Paul E. Dangerously. The art form has changed, but it's also very much the same. And storytelling good storytelling is good storytelling.



For more information about *The Crippler's Son* or about Max Riffner, visit <https://maxriffner.com/>