

Around The World In 90 Minutes

With Marty Essen

STORY BY IAN KIRBY



When you have a speaker on campus, often the date is full of compromises. Perhaps the topic has mass appeal, but the presenter is boring. Maybe it is a dynamic presentation, but too “educational” or obscure to draw a crowd. Wouldn’t it be great if it were more common to find a talented presenter with a popular topic that could actually entertain while educating?

Perhaps Marty Essen has hit that mark. His award winning book *Cool Creatures: Hot Planet, Exploring The Seven Continents* serves as the foundation for his highly successful live multimedia presentation **Around The World In 90 Minutes**. It has been so successful in fact, that he has won entered the market with a record setting streak. “My show has been APCA’s #1 booked college speaker for 18 months straight, from November of 2008 to April of 2010.”

Marty set out to travel the world documenting fascinating and unusual wildlife on all seven continents. This accomplishment, which he completed over the course of three years with his intrepid wife Deb by his side, more than filled up his book with stories of his adventures. In addition, Marty went to great lengths to scientifically identify and document the species he encountered, so his presentation is very much based

on sound research and not just anecdotal theatrics (though they are included in healthy doses). “The theme of our travels was to search out rare and interesting wildlife all over the world,” he says. “We had incredible adventures on every continent; the book practically wrote itself.”

The live presentation seemed to naturally follow. “When my book came out, I went on a tour, like most authors do. Something that bothered me however was when I had gone to these types of events in the past where other authors were reading from their books, I was always kind of bored. I couldn’t envision myself going to a bookstore and simply reading from my book.”

So, Marty got creative. “I decided to put together this little show based on a photo slide show from our trips. People began commenting about how much they liked it and in a roundabout way I learned there were other markets I could take this type of presentation to professionally, such as colleges.”

Marty knew he wouldn’t be able to take an impromptu bookstore session and expect to book it out as a stage performance without adding some serious meat. “I took that basic format and revamped it to be much more exciting, funnier, more informative and turned it into a real performance. I wasn’t sure how it would go over in the college market because to my knowledge, there is nothing else like it.”

Apparently Marty’s apprehension was misplaced, because the show has turned into a success. “I am very pleased to find out it has been a hit.

I have received rave reviews from each location the show has been held. I think the reason for this is because the show is so multifaceted. It is an entertaining experience and no one is bored, but there is also a deep educational aspect to the presentation and an overall message delivered as well. That's why I call ***Around The World in 90 Minutes*** one part theater, one part lecture, one part stand-up comedy and one part slide show. There is a lot going on to keep audience's attention."

Marty says the experience is full of the "oohs" and "aahs" that let you know an audience is going to remember this next week. "They are going to see some animals they have never seen before. There are some really bizarre looking creatures and some that are incredibly rare. They will learn a lot about the earth as we travel through the show continent by continent."

Always being an animal lover, this presentation was an inevitable fit for Marty, but he brings to the table experience as a performer and managing audiences long before this dream came to fruition. "I am one of those people where one career has lead to another and another throughout my entire life. I started out at 13 years old working at a radio station. By 16, I was the youngest person in the history of Minnesota to be on the air as a regular salaried disc jockey."

Marty worked his way through high school and college in Duluth, eventually getting an opportunity to move from Duluth to Minneapolis with the intention of opening a talent agency. "The person I partnered with was at one time one of the biggest talent managers in New York City. He used to manage Tommy James and the Chandelles and was the U.S. agent for The Who. Working with him as vice president of the company for several years provided great learning experiences and opportunities in the entertainment industry."

Perhaps their small direct contribution to pop culture and claim to fame came with a number three hit entitled "Dance Electric," written by Prince, performed by Andre' Cymone, the pop star's partner. "One of my jobs at the talent agency was to put together stage shows for rock n' roll bands we would book all over the country. Getting them to be exciting on stage, choreograph movements and helping them to build overall rapport with the audience were my main priorities."

This would become the blueprint Marty would consult when it came to constructing himself a great stage show for the college market, but this eventuality would lie dormant for some time while Marty recharged his batteries. "I ended up leaving the talent business and moved to Montana where I am now. I got involved with a totally unrelated field," he laughs.



"I run a local phone company here, but my true love has always been wildlife. Ever since I was a kid I wanted to become a herpetologist, a scientist who studies reptiles and amphibians. After living a "normal" and quiet life for a while, my wife and I decided we needed to get out and away from it all. We had no idea that our first trip to Belize would catalyze this grand adventure that would take us across all seven continents."

The next three and a half year's travels would become the skeleton for *Cool Creatures, Hot Planet: Exploring The Seven Continents* and *Around the World In 90 Minutes*. This is when Marty took that practical knowledge of show business and put it to good use. "To make the show different, I took some of my old rock n' roll experience to make this a performance, not just a lecture. I didn't want to do the tired boring old format where I just go stand behind the lectern and drone on from a script throughout the slide show. I wanted something that was exciting. Merging rock n' roll into college lecture was my strategy."

From big movements exemplifying charisma to personally identifying with the performance location and members of the audience, Marty's techniques do take the show to another plane. "For example, part of making a band's performance dynamic is teaching them to utilize the space they are given to the fullest. If they are on a small stage in an intimate space, they do concise, intense movements, whereas on a large stage they perform great, sweeping movements. It's things like this that pack my show with energy. There are times in it where I am literally crawling on my hands and knees across the stage as I am reenacting a particular adventure that saw me face to face with a stalking Komodo Dragon. Sometimes I look out in the audience and see mouths hanging open as I crawl across the floor," he says smiling.

Probably what makes Marty's show truly exciting and interesting is the content, the meat, the difference between any show being memorable experience or forgettable fluff. Don't think for a moment that the stories behind this show are dull, Marty and Deb certainly didn't just snap photos from behind the velvet rope; they went out of their way to inject themselves into situations that, while dangerous, also became fodder for some great storytelling.

Marty details many stories in both his book and live presentation and we only have room here to detail one choice selection. Probably one of the most dramatic and potentially deadly encounters Marty and Deb faced was

on the Zambezi River in Zimbabwe, Africa. "I think the natural one to talk about is our hippo story. My wife Deb and I were two of the few people to ever survive a hippo attack.

"When I was writing the book, we'd go on a series of journeys each for two or three weeks at the time and then I would come back and work on that section of the book. Writing a book like that, I couldn't help but worry what the manuscripted results of an uneventful trip would be. I didn't want to subject my readers to something not worth reading, and the same goes for an audience at one of my shows. Luckily, we had an incredible trip on every one of our adventures. The last one was to Zimbabwe."

Having just finished hiking 53 miles across Mana Pools National Park, it's obvious Marty and Deb didn't take the typical tourist's view of Africa as seen from the back of a truck. "We specifically arranged to get down and hike with the animals, so we could get a genuine feel for what it was like to no longer be number one on the food chain."

Plodding a course over five days, the intrepid duo traveled with two other couples and a guide. After seeing incredible wildlife (documented by photos in ***Around The World In 90 Minutes***), they boarded five canoes to take down river back out to their eventual departure point, instead of retracing on land to their point of origin. "We were nervous about this portion of the trip because we had seen all of these hippos and huge Nile Crocodiles, knowing well there were probably even bigger ones in the water. In fact, we were told we would pass approximately 1500 hippos during our journey down the Zambezi River, which was to take three days."

The native guide, sensing his wards' unease, sat down the group to lend some comfort. "Our main guide said 'Listen, I have been taking people down the Zambezi River for 16 years and never once have I had anyone attacked by an animal. Sit back, relax and you will be surprised how safe and easy this trip is.'" Anyone ever heard of foreshadowing (so often the precursor of irony)?

"We weren't on the river for more than 15 minutes when we came across this barricade of hippos. The great beasts were snorting and roaring and the obvious question of just how we'd pass this floating blockade was written on everyone's face. Pretty soon though, they sank just under the surface and we glided right over them, though I'd bet they could hear our hearts pounding."



The trip progressed smoothly for the next three hours or so, by which time the river had calmed down and there weren't any more hippos sighted. "It was a beautiful day and we were just enjoying the float. That river is interesting because of its topographical variety. It can be very deep along the banks while very shallow in the middle. We were traveling along the shore single file, wanting to be in deep water, generally the safest place. Deb and I were in the second to last canoe when all of a sudden we feel this bump. We both thought maybe we hit a rock."

A stroke of luck in the unfolding events that continued is all that leaves the two alive to tell the tale. "The next thing we knew, we were six feet in the air. The hippo had seized the craft, it's lower tusks puncturing the hull, it's upper jaw coming over and snapping the gunwale. If you can imagine a front-end loader picking up the canoe and dumping us on-shore, you get the picture."

Had Marty and Deb landed in the water, there's little doubt the hippo would have killed them both. "I can still see it in slow motion: I fly up in the air and out of the canoe first, followed by Deb. She hits the ground with this sickening thud and I'm thinking 'oh my God, she's dead.' I ran up to check her as she was climbing to her feet. At the same time, we both remembered the 3,500 pound hippo behind us. As we wheeled around, we saw the hippo drop the canoe and melt back into the river. My wife and I looked at each other and broke into hysterical laughter. How often does someone make it through a hippo attack?" Of course the guide was beside himself, but Marty can tell you all about that.

This is just one of the colorful stories Marty tells in ***Around The World In 90 Minutes***. Marty also offers a condensed version in ***Around***

The World in 60 Minutes. There is also a workshop option. "While ***Around the World in 90 Minutes*** is my signature show, I have also won six national awards for my writing and possess substantial knowledge of the publishing industry. With that in mind, I'm unveiling a new lecture for 2010: ***Cool Writing Careers***. Unlike ***Around the World in 90 Minutes***, which is a tightly rehearsed show, performed primarily in auditoriums, ballrooms, and lecture halls, ***Cool Writing Careers*** is a 50-minute-long informal talk, geared toward classrooms and small-to-medium-sized groups. It begins with an overview and then proceeds directly to questions and answers."

For campuses interested in promoting the "Green" mentality, Marty's show comes with a strong message aimed at having an impact on our environment for the better, not worse. "I do it in such a way not to be preachy, because I understand students do not want that. On the contrary, when I speak about the environmental portion of the program, I see most students nodding their heads right along with everything I am saying. I talk about orangutans on the island of Borneo, which are being obliterated because their habitats are being razed to produce palm oil. Scientists are predicting if we don't do something, these animals could be extinct within 10-30 years."

Marty talks about why this happens and what we can do about it. Other messages permeate his show, as well as the wild and colorful photos and theatrical presentation Marty himself brings. Consider this event for your campus today.

BOOK IT! For more information on bringing Marty for one of your programs, contact him at (406) 642-3333. For a virtual link, go to our website at campusactivitiesmagazine.com