

The Atlanta Puppetry Rag

September, 1997. Issue 3

Newsletter of the Atlanta/Southeast Puppetry Guild

Spotlight on Dorothy Rankin By Susan Kinney

I recently met a remarkable woman by the name of Dorothy Rankin. A puppeteer and a character costume maker from Boston, Mrs. Rankin has an impressive history. Mrs. Rankin was inspired to start making puppets when her daughter, born physically challenged, kicked at her blanket and made the pictures of the puppets on it move. Having no prior experience in the field of puppetry, she researched through books at the library on how to sculpt and design puppets to entertain and stimulate her daughter.

Through this first enterprise grew a booming cottage industry of marionette shows and character costume entertainment. The May 1958 issue of Popular Mechanics magazine had an article on how to build a marionette with wonderfully detailed drawings and pictures of Mrs. Rankin's puppets.

One of Dorothy's puppets was a magician that had several tricks up his sleeve. He had a suitcase that held another puppet and feather flowers literally up one sleeve and could do the "floating ball" trick. Once, when she was performing the magician, his leg fell off during the act. "Afterwards," Dorothy mused, "Paul Anka came up to me and said what a clever trick that was! He thought it had been part of the act!"

Through her puppetry, Dorothy met many famous and interesting people. She once turned down an offer to perform on the Ed Sullivan Show because she felt she needed to spend more time with her children. As the costumed character "Rag Bag Annie" with her sidekick "Mortimer Monkey," Mrs. Rankin entertained at festivals and children's hospitals throughout the New England states.

Dorothy was able to travel to many different countries by performing on cruise ships with her marionettes. On one occasion, when the seas were a bit rough, Dorothy recalled that she had to enlist people to hold the stage in place while she performed since her stage was on wheels so that she could roll it out faster when it was her time to perform.

The daughter who sparked her artistic ability is now a teacher in Wakefield, Massachusetts and uses puppets to teach her students. She has a master's degree in Indian Lore.

From The President's Corner By Susan Kinney

It is difficult to describe my first national puppetry festival. There is so much emotion involved: the feeling of camaraderie was the first thing I remember. Everyone was a friend whether we had met before or not. We knew we had at least one thing in common - puppetry.

The workshops and shows were top quality and varied. There was something for everyone! Children's shows along with adult shows, workshops for beginners as well as advanced learners, a store filled to the brim with puppets and related items, and, if at the end of the day you were not too full, you could go to the Potpourri for more!

Although I was too late to actually take the full class, I was allowed to observe Don Becker's class on miniature puppet building. This was my favorite workshop. It was fascinating to watch Don patiently guide his students to make marvelous little works of art. I received a wealth of knowledge just from watching and taking notes from this master puppeteer. I was so inspired that I applied to give a workshop on small rod puppets at the 1998 regional Festival.

Nick Barone's workshop on rod puppet mechanisms was equally informative (and very crowded). He gave lots of tips on materials that he had already tried and tested and he even told where to get them (Home Depot seems to be a favorite of his).

The Fable of the Fox by the Spanish troupe Los Titiriteros brought tears to my eyes as well as everyone else in the auditorium and at the Christmas Carol I felt riveted to the Stage watching the beautiful work of David Simpich. I was mesmerized by his storytelling.

Again and again I was amazed at the wonderful shows performed at the Festival.

I was very impressed by the fact that the well-known artists and performers were genuinely eager to help newcomers and intermediates with their wealth of information and expertise. With the beginnings of friendships which I hope to nurture at future festivals and through the years to come, I left the festival exhausted from trying to squeeze in everything and with a feeling of sadness because the time was over. However, I was also inspired and energized by my newfound education.

Summer Puppet Theater!! By Betsy and Walter Stark

Before summer comes to an end, we must acknowledge the great job of the adult performers who brought us Rex Rocket's Illuminating Adventures in Outer Space, Creepy Puppet Theater, and puppet improvisation from Dad's Garage Theater.

For six weekends at the Center for Puppetry Arts, these fine performers brought us experimental puppetry. The improvisation crew from Dad's Garage Theater brought us the wonderful characters of Turtle, Valcrow, Stupid Monkey, Bacon Sandwich, and others. These performers, who refused to reveal

their identities, brought us the best game of Jeopardy I have ever seen played (the audience provided the silliest answers and the puppets provided the silliest questions), the finest singing of madrigals I have ever heard along with the most inventive verses, and introduced the great game of creating a story one word at a time between two characters. And there was so much more!

Creepy Puppet Theater performed on two occasions. These two women are very creative and, when they put their mind to it, can write and perform very well. They tended to use the "it looks like they made this up five minutes ago" style. But it is clear that beneath this veneer is some real talent. Let's hope they will develop their talents through XPT or other venues. Adult puppetry audiences will continue to look forward to seeing their work.

The centerpiece of each evenings entertainment was "The Illuminating Adventures of Rex Rocket in Outer Space." This hilarious tribute to the movie serials of the thirties and forties performed a different episode every week. While the shows were well received critically, the show changed in flavor so much through the run that the reviews which seemed to be written about one episode only reminded me of the story of the blind men trying to describe an elephant. One feeling the trunk thinking that it was like a snake. Another felt the tail and proclaimed it a rope. The last feeling the side exclaimed that the others were mistaken as the elephant was clearly a wall. They all were of course correct, and all mistaken.

The sum of the experience with Rex was far greater than the parts. The design of the puppets and set were particularly strong. All of the stories were well and cleverly written, and the performers were effective in the styles they chose. Of special note is the fact that even though most performers had multiple parts, this was never obvious with plenty of differentiation in tone and style.

Credit goes to Grit Productions (Marc Cram, Beth Dalton, Eric Novak, and Matt Yates), who boldly took on this project, and did the incredible amount of work required to mount this production with almost no outside support. This adventuresome spirit invokes what is the best of the Puppetry Center and the art of puppetry. In addition to providing a growing audience with a splendid summer of entertainment, this show allowed a needed venue for some of the untapped

talent which is always at the Center to develop and show case their skills. I hope to see more from this group in the future, and I hope that other groups have the opportunity to follow their lead.

NEW!!! Fall Gourd Workshop Planned!!!

Gail McKay, puppet builder, puppeteer and storyteller extraordinaire, has offered to host a workshop this fall on puppet making with gourds. Gourds are plants which have hardened to a hard wooden material into all sorts of shapes, which are what makes them so wonderful for puppetry. One can find shapes for people, animals, and props. The shapes can be carved, painted, costumed, and anything else, only limited to your imagination.

The workshop is a two-step process. First, Gail will be leading a group to Augusta, Georgia to select the gourds. This will be an all day trip and, due to Gail's schedule, must be on either a Monday or a Friday. For those of you who cannot participate on a workday, please call Gail and let her know what shape you are looking for. Those of us planning on attending will help Gail look for all the shapes requested.

The second step is the actual workshop. Gail will host this in her Grant Park home studio. The workshop will probably occur on a Sunday in October or November. Sorry for the lack of details. Many things depend on the number of people interested in taking the workshop. Please call Gail at (404) 622-7672.

*** Lookout Corner!!**

This issue initiates a new section of the newsletter. Susan Kinney, our President, is looking for a copy of the May 1958 issue of Popular Mechanics Magazine. Please call Susan at the Center for Puppetry Arts, if you locate or have a lead to share with her. She can be reached at (404) 873-3089, ext. 35. Please contact the editor with additional items to add at (404) 315-6161 or puppetstark @ mindspring.com.

Seen downtown, during the Arts Festival: Peter Hart performing his puppets, Brien Engel playing the glass harmonica, and Tak juggling.

According to Susan Kinney, Guild President, Howdy Doody Christmas ornaments are available at ~~Wal-Mart~~ Department stores. *Hallmark*

Upcoming Puppetry Guild Meeting!!!

The Guild hosted two successful and well-attended socials this summer. The first was on July 4th and celebrated the visit of the Syrotiak's from National Marionette Theater, based in Vermont and the second, celebrated the visit of Hobe Ford of Golden Rod Puppets, based in Weaverville, North Carolina. The next Guild meeting is right around the corner!!

- DATE: Sunday, September 28, 1997.
- TIME: 4:00 to 8:00 p.m.
- PLACE: Home of Alice Rhodes, 3637 Victoria Drive, Stone Mountain. (See map) (404) 296-7288.
- SCHEDULE: 4-5:00 - Visit and Socialize
5:00 - Eat! Please bring something yummy to share!
6:00 - Business Meeting
6:30-8:00 - Program (comedy writing by Bob Abdou)

Alice asks that people please bring folding chairs, if you have them. Thanks!

Please Note!!

- Nov. 9 Next Puppetry Guild Meeting!
- Place To Be Announced (any volunteers?)

Upcoming Puppetry Events - Fall 1997

- Bread and Puppet Theater from Vermont**
- Tuesday Sept. 30 Front lawn, Grady High School.
6:00 p.m. bring your blanket and picnic.

7:00 Performance of the circus.

Wednesday
October 1 Gym, Atlanta International School (Old North Fulton High School).
7:30 p.m. Performance of "America Sleeping," a political satire

Center for Puppetry Arts Adult Series

Oct. 4&5 David Simpich Marionettes. "The Hans Christian Andersen Storybook."

Nov. 15,16 David Syrotiak's National Marionette Theater. "In Concert."

Center for Puppetry Art Family Series

Oct. 18 Puppetry Arts Festival. Volunteers needed. Please call the Puppetry Center to volunteer. Phone number is (404) 873-3089.

Sept.25-
Dec. 13 Winnie the Pooh

Nov. 28 The Velveteen Rabbit
-January, 1998

→ Transitions.

Margo Rose: January 31, 1903-September 13, 1997 - article by Fred Thompson

I have the sad task of informing you of the passing of Margo Rose. Margo, 94, died on Saturday, September 13, 1997 in New London, Connecticut.

Margo Rose, born Margaret, began her career in puppetry as a student at Cornell College in Iowa. She was "bitten" while operating a marionette her sister Dorothy had made from a doll. Margo said "I could make them come alive. I was sunk. That was the rest of my life." And so it was.

She was hired by Tony Sarg in 1927 where Matt Searle, Sarg's company manager, suggested she change her name to Margo, the name she used ever since. She toured with The Tony Sarg Marionettes until 1931, taking the 1929 season off to study sculpture at the British Academy in Rome.

Rufus Rose joined the Sarg company at Christmas, 1928. He and Margo were married in 1930 and in 1931, the Roses formed their own touring company.

The Roses toured the United States in the 1930s, 40s and 50s as the Rufus Rose Marionettes, billed as "America's Foremost Artists of the Marionette Theater." The rest is history.

Margo, as evidenced by her work, brought a thoughtful and brilliant artistry to her modeling and designs. Her capable eye and knowing hand created some of the finest marionette figures ever. Her delicate, careful but sure manipulation of a marionette has won the admiration of many a puppeteer and brought to life so many wonderful characters.

Any mention of Margo must also include Rufus, as their lives and work were so wonderfully intertwined. And they were a great team. Rufus, an outstanding craftsman, mechanic, inventor, and "enthusiastic" manipulator of marionettes, proved to be the perfect partner for Margo. He passed away in 1975.

Beyond their gifts of their performances, many have benefitted from their generosity as colleagues, teachers and friends. True to the tradition of puppetry, they gave freely of their knowledge and experience.

Patient and supportive, firm but kind, Margo continued teaching this summer, where her daily visits to the marionette workshop at the National Puppetry Conference were eagerly awaited.

She never thought the Roses were famous. "We just did what we had to do." Always self effacing, Margo had little time for flattery. She seemed, at times, embarrassed by the attention.

Jim Rose, one of her sons, shared a conversation he had with Margo this past year. He asked her what she thought the Rose legacy would be to puppetry. Margo thought a while and replied, "Well, we made good puppets." Yes, they did.

Some significant dates in the Roses' career:

1933 A&P Marionette Carnival, Chicago World's Fair, "A Century of Progress"

1938 "Jerry Pulls the Strings," the first full length commercial film using marionettes.

1948 Performed "Scrooge" over ABC-TV in New York, on Christmas Eve, the first national broadcast of a marionette show on television.

1950 Filmed "The Ant and the Grasshopper" and the classic "Toymaker," by Martin Stevens.

1952 Engaged as puppeteers for the "Howdy Doody Show." Designed and built many new characters. The show closed in 1960.

1958 Created and operated marionettes for the "Blue Fairy" series, a retelling of the "Pinocchio" adventures for WGN-TV in Chicago. Won the Peabody Award for children's programming.

1964 Filmed three full length features using marionettes for TV: "Treasure Island," "Rip Van Winkle," and "Aladdin."

1965 Instrumental in establishing the Eugene O'Neill Theater Center in Waterford, Connecticut.

1967 Roses one of two puppet companies selected to represent the U.S. at EXPO '67 in Montreal (World's Fair).

1997 Margo Rose inducted into the Connecticut Woman's Hall of Fame in May, recognizing her lifetime achievements in the field of puppetry and the enduring value of that achievement.

This is but a brief overview of an outstanding career in the art of puppetry. There is no way of knowing how many people Rufus and Margo have touched. It would be fair to say that the Rose legacy goes far beyond just "... making good puppets." Margo will be missed.

(Please note: The editor summarized this article from an article by Fred Thompson, provided by Lisa Rhodes, from the Puppetry Home Page on the World Wide Web).