

CARTER FAMILY MARIONETTES

Celebrating FOUR DECADES

by Luman Coad

From their discovery of puppetry at the University of California, through the founding of a major puppet center and theater in Seattle, it's been a full 40 years of creativity.

In the Beginning...

Forty years. When looking forward, it seems to stretch beyond forever but when looking back it seems shorter than last month.

Despite changes of company name and some personnel since the troupe was originally formed, the key people have always been Stephen and Chris Carter. The couple were students at the University of California at Santa Cruz in the early '70s—Stephen studying sculpture and Chris dance. At UC Santa Cruz, the disciplines of Fine Art, Theatre, and Dance share the same complex which generated a lot of multi-media work. Both Stephen and Chris had done some puppetry prior to college and Stephen had some theatre experience. Puppetry seemed a natural merging of interests.

Prior to his final year, Stephen was awarded a scholarship to study at the Hornsey School of Art in London and the couple moved across the Big Pond for a year. While there, their daughter Heather was born. At that time, and in reaction to the previous rigid instruction, Hornsey had an unstructured program so Stephen began building puppets, doing some street theatre, and working in a summer puppet troupe with kids in parks.



Straight out of college, Chris and Stephen Carter move to Seattle and, together with several friends, establish their first professional ensemble. The Family Bathtub Puppet Theater shared a building near Pike Place Market. Family Bathtub staged shows for children as well as more experimental plays, including "The Nose" based on the short story by Nikolai Gogol.

The Carters returned to UC Santa Cruz for Stephen's final year. His graduate program, "Love and Ferocity Among the Objects" was a multi-media olio which included puppets.

With five college friends, Todd Moore, Joby Gordon, Tim Sapunor, Thom Caylor, and Lorna Kohler, The Family Bathtub was formed.

The First Theater for The Family Bathtub

After graduation, all seven (eight, including Heather!) had relocated to Seattle. Three years later the Family Bathtub opened their first venue, The Puppet House, in a rented space and shared the venue with the Wisdom Marionettes.

Dmitri was born in 1977 and two years later Tim, Thom, and Lorna left the company. The remaining four renamed themselves Theatre Picaro. ("Picaro" being a play on picaresque—Spanish for a sharp-witted vagabond or rogue.)



Before the founding Carter Family Marionettes and Northwest Puppet Center, Chris and Stephen Carter created Theatre Picaro together with Todd and Joby Moore. The two families toured Europe and North America, including this stop in Mexico City with "The Miraculous Kasper", a production which received The UNIMA Citation of Excellence in 1982.

1980: An Awakening

The 1980 UNIMA Congress in Washington, DC was an awakening for the troupe. Stephen says, "It was a Puppet 101 course which encouraged us to take puppetry seriously."

The Manteo Marionettes use of traditional Sicilian rod marionettes was an inspiration. Unlike all-string marionettes which are easily tangled and difficult to control during rapid, repeated actions, the rods to the head and right arm (used for sword fighting) allow the manipulator to have precise control over the puppet. This is the style of marionette the Carters adopted for many, if not most, of their productions.

A new name and a permanent home

When Todd and Joby withdrew in 1983, the Carters decided to include their two children in the enterprise and renamed themselves The Carter Family Marionettes. Five years later the company opened the Northwest Puppet Center in a rented space at the Phinney Neighborhood Center and began searching for a building of their own. Finally a small church was purchased in the Maple Leaf neighbourhood and

the NW Puppet Center moved into their new home.

The large basement social hall was transformed into an inviting lobby with display cases around the periphery while the upstairs sanctuary became a comfortable theatre. The existing platform was extended, a fly system and stage curtains were installed, as were systems for lighting and sound. Portable risers were used to rake the auditorium floor for the first season before a permanent series of terraces was built. The entire was attractively decorated in royal blue, gray, and red. A series of on-going renovations and improvements have created a most attractive theatre, seating approximately 180 people.

Some one hundred performances are scheduled each year despite the theater being required to remain closed during the summer months because it is in a residential area. As well as productions by the Carters, each season's program includes selected guest artists such as Oregon Shadow Theater, Paul Mesner, the Thistle Theater, Peter Allen, Coad Canada Puppets, and others.

Over the years numerous productions have been created in a variety of genres ranging from traditional stories such as *Orlando Furioso* and the *Monkey King*, to children's stories such as *The Travels of Barbar* and the *Elephant's Child*, to puppet



Mrs. Twig has cultivated her own place in the earth, attracted many ardent admirers and has appeared in several original puppet plays. After many years in the theater, Mrs. Twig now prefers to reside amongst the trees at Villa Pupi Pazzi on Lopez Island where she coexists with deer, eagles, chipmunks and a couple of like-minded people (Chris and Stephen Carter).

heroes such as Mr. Punch and Kaspar, to original fables such as *Mrs. Twig Meets the Birthday Dog* and *The Yellow Trunk Show*.

Study Abroad

Researching folk theatre has always been an interest so with several trips to Sicily in search of Opera dei Pupi, Stephen received a Fulbright Fellowship to work with Teatru Tandaria in Bucharest. For two years the family lived in Bucharest and spent time researching folk theater in Transylvania.

The Opera Series

A major focus for over ten years has been to produce a chamber opera each season. The first two productions were created for a sponsor in the San Francisco Bay Area and the Early Music Guild sponsored the initial performances in Seattle. Between 2002 and 2012, the operas were a part of the Northwest Puppet Center's annual schedule. In addition to well-known titles such as *Don Giovanni* and the *Magic Flute*, lesser known works have included *Die Feuersbrunst (The Burning House)*, *The Liberation of Ruggiero from the Island of Alcina*, and *Pulcinella Vendicato*.



Northwest Puppet Center's 2008 production of Mozart's "Don Giovanni" • Photo by Dmitri Carter

Dmitri Carter and New Ventures

Dmitri now manages the Northwest Puppet Center while Chris and Stephen slide into a well-earned retirement on Lopez Island. Each of their three grandchildren have performed with the company and are gradually becoming more involved in the Center.

The current season will feature only guest artists because, in addition to all the Center's administration tasks, Dmitri has begun to build a puppet research center.

A few of the notable collections now included are the •Founders' Collection of Chris and Stephen Carter

- the Lettie Connell Schubert Library and Archives
- the Josie Robbins Collection

•and most recently the Cook/Marks Puppet Collection. Many other individuals have donated puppets and publications so the collection has now grown too large for the small church. Recently another building was purchased to securely house it. The library/museum has been made possible thanks to major support from the Jacqueline Marks Fund, the Schubert Family, and 4Culture. Donations are gratefully accepted to further the preservation work.

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Photos courtesy of the Carter Family Marionettes and the Northwest Puppet Center.

For news on what's happening with the Cook / Marks Collection at the Center, read on 