THE ART OF BIL BAIRD
The Art of Bil Baird

Center for Puppetry Arts Museum
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Foreword

Bil Baird’s career in puppetry spanned six decades across television, film and Broadway and led to the creation of nearly 3,000 puppets. In looking at the history of such a prolific puppeteer one can easily become entangled in the numerous details of this extraordinary life.

In this exhibition we set out to introduce our audiences to the multiplicities of Bil Baird’s life by illuminating some highlights of his career — Broadway and “Flahooley,” television and “Snarky Parker,” film and “The Sound of Music,” live theatre and “Pinocchio.” These are simply touchstones. Would that space allowed us to include everything!

Bil’s contributions to the field cannot be overemphasized. His work in television was truly pioneering and influenced America’s best loved Muppeteer, Jim Henson. Bil’s book The Art of the Puppet has become a classic in the field. And even today his work continues to be performed by his son Peter Baird. In 1989, two years after Bil’s death, Bil Baird’s Marionettes received a Citation of Excellence from UNIMA-USA for “Pinocchio.” It is only fitting that such an expansive career should leave behind a legacy that continues to grow and thrive.

—Kerry McCarthy, Curator

Acknowledgements

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Vincent Anthony
Executive Director

Kerry McCarthy
Museum Director

Fred Astaire, Snarky Parker, and Ronald Reagan; collection of Donald Rubin.
“My puppets have always been sort of garrulous and happy and a little bit sexy... There has to be a little bit of me in every puppet I make.” —Bil Baird

Bil Baird was one of America’s most versatile and talented performers. His work included television shows, films, Broadway, and live performances in his own theater. He was a sculptor, painter, musician, writer, cartoonist, and woodcarver. He was an entertainer. He was, in short, a puppeteer, for he believed a puppeteer must be much more than one who manipulates puppets. Rather, Bil Baird felt that a good puppeteer must have many talents and must embody many disciplines, just as puppetry itself embodies many art forms. It is in this respect that Bil Baird is still considered to have been one of the world’s most consummate puppeteers.

“You could put him in a room with all his toys out of reach. When you looked in, 10 minutes later, he would have concocted a fascinating toy out of his shoelaces...” —Louise Baird (Bil’s mother)

William Britton Baird was born in 1904. When Bil was eight years old his father made him his first puppet. Young Baird was immediately captivated with the art and he began to create shows of his own:

While I was in high school I built my own stage in the attic and put on a puppet production of “Treasure Island,” using an old auto dashboard for a switchboard for the lights.
After college, Baird traveled to Europe, supporting himself for a year by playing the accordion (one of some 30 instruments he played). Upon his return to the United States he began a five-year apprenticeship with Tony Sarg. Among other duties, Baird coordinated the handling of the enormous Macy's Parade balloons which Sarg designed. "To me they are simply upside-down marionettes, manipulated by strings from below rather than above," Baird wrote.

"Cora was a tremendous influence... If it hadn't been for her I don't think there'd have been a career like Bil Baird's like we know it today..." 

—Pady Blackwood (Puppeteer, Bil Baird's Marionettes)

In 1935 Orson Welles produced Doctor Faustus for the W.P.A. Federal Theater Project, commissioning Bil Baird to create marionettes to represent the Seven Deadly Sins. Actress Cora Burlar was cast to speak the voices of Envy, Gluttony, and Sloth. In 1937 Cora and Bil were married, and she decided to give up her career as an actress in order to become his full partner.

Cora Baird soon became an integral part of the Baird enterprises. Not only an accomplished puppeteer who performed all of the female...
characters, Cora also helped to design and build the puppets, assisted in the creation of shows, and managed the business end of the company.

The Bairds performed at the Chicago and New York World's Fairs in the late 1930's and put together a touring nightclub act. Soon they were performing on Broadway in such shows as the 1943 Ziegfield Follies and Flahooley (1951).

"The Bil Baird Marionettes have a genius for mockery and drollery."

—New York Times

Flahooley was a musical satirizing big business. The play was set in a toy factory and the Baird marionettes served as counterpoints to the live actors in the show. Although Flahooley was criticized for being "verbose and humorless," the Baird marionettes received excellent notices. Theirs were also the first puppets to have roles in a Broadway musical (and not used simply as an act in a follies show).

"Television was the machine's name, and it came in with a bang."

—Bil Baird

The Bairds performed in other Broadway shows, made many short films, and created shows of their own in the converted carriage house.
in which they lived. In 1950, however, television called, and their first television show, Life With Snarky Parker, debuted on CBS-TV.

Directed by Yul Brynner, Snarky Parker was a tongue-in-cheek Western. Snarky, the hero, was a puppet made of bits and pieces of an old piano and other odds and ends. This resourcefulness in puppet-building was a hallmark of the Bairds who "didn't dare throw anything away." Everything was used and re-used. Puppet characters were updated in keeping with the times, for Baird believed:

\[\text{The greatest pitfall for the puppeteer is his reluctance to part with the tangible material he has built and his tendency to work with it as long as possible. When an idea no longer reflects the times, it dries up... The puppet... quickly becomes dated as life changes...}^{10}\]

Angus and Wee Cooper O’Fife, from Wee Cooper O’Fife, collections of Charles H. MacNider Museum and Donald Rubin, respectively.

"Snarky was a wise guy that started out as an M.C. for a vaudeville number. I think that he was just one of the alter-egos that William had... Snarky was a way to vocalize things, to be rude."^{11}

—Peter Baird (Bill’s son)

The character of Snarky Parker debuted years before he had his own show. It was during one performance of the 1943 Ziegfield Follies that Snarky’s ability to “vocalize things” for Bill came in particularly handy. A sound technician had mistakenly played the wrong music for two of the Baird puppet routines, effectively ruining their act and very nearly one of the biggest opportunities of their careers.
Suddenly, Snarky took over, apologizing to the audience and shouting at the technician. The problems were straightened out, and the Bairds’ careers were saved.

*Life With Snarky Parker* was presented in five fifteen-minute sequences per week. This created a pace of work radically faster and much more demanding than that to which the Baird company was accustomed. Enormous changes were necessary: sets were simplified, complicated lighting was eliminated, and the puppets had to be designed for use suitable for television.
"The strain of building and writing was terrific. Physically, the work was about as hard as anything we'd ever done. But the rush of ideas was stimulating."

—Bil Baird

Snarky Parker aired for one year, and the Bairds went on to create other popular television shows, such as The Bil Baird Show, The Whistling Wizard, and The Morning Show (with its puppet actors and co-stars Walter Cronkite and later Jack Paar).

With so many television programs of his own, as well as appearances on numerous variety shows, Bil was constantly creating new characters. He believed that the puppets should not attempt to be replicas of humans: "If a human can do it better, I say don't try it with puppets.”

Most of the nearly 3,000 puppets eventually built by the Baird team began as ideas in Bil Baird's head. "We start from the character, and the puppet is built to do and move the way such a character would," said Cora. For many of their marionettes, Bil would do colored sketches first, and then the figure was sculpted in clay. A plaster mold was made of the clay figure, and then celastic (a durable papier-mâché-like material) was put into the mold. The hardened celastic was then painted, and a new character was born.
"High on a hill was a lonely goatherd..."15

—The Sound of Music

In 1965 the Bairds collaborated with producer-director Robert Wise to film the "Lonely Goatherd" sequence in the movie version of The Sound of Music. Peter Baird later said:

It was fabulous for them to work. It was one of the first big-time features that they had done and they were astounded at the opulence of film production... It was a week or two weeks that they used just to do that sequence, which is really quite short.16

The Bairds and their puppets appeared on many television programs in the 1950's and 1960's, and were nominated for an Emmy Award for "Peter and the Wolf" (with Art Carney) in 1958. In 1966-1971 the Bairds made history by working with NBC Television to simulate the maneuvers of NASA's Gemini space explorations and Apollo moon landings.
"The other cultural capitals of the world—Paris, Milan, Berlin, Prague, and Moscow—have their puppet theaters. It always seemed ridiculous to us that New York, of all places, should have no puppet theater of its own."

—Bil Baird

For years the Bairds had dreamed of opening a permanent theater in the six-story former warehouse in which they and their two children had lived since 1958. Located at 59 Barrow Street in New York's Greenwich Village, The Bil Baird Theater opened on December 24, 1966 with a production of "Davy Jones' Locker."
The following February the Bairds held a gala opening of the theater in conjunction with the opening of *People Is The Thing The World Is Fullest Of*, a show intended for adult audiences. Well-received by the critics, *People Is* dealt with such topical concerns as pollution and the population explosion.

“*When she died he was just devastated and totally, totally lost without her.*”¹⁸ —Pady Blackwood

The Bairds next mounted a production of *Winnie The Pooh*. During the run of this show, in December 1967, Cora Baird died. The company was stunned:

*This was a terrible blow to Bil and to all of us. Cora had been the glue that made things hang together and the oil that made the machinery work. Cora’s passing left a great gap in the spirit that had created this theatre and made it work. But to quote that old bromide ‘The show must go on,’ and it did!*¹⁹

‘*Bil asked, ‘Can you sing?’ No! ‘Can you dance?’ No!! ‘Do you play any musical instruments?’ No!!! ‘Speak any foreign languages?’ No!!! Panic set in. I thought he wanted a puppeteer.’*”²⁰

—Bob Brown (Puppeteer, Bil Baird’s Marionettes)

Over the next few years The Bil Baird Theater presented numerous shows, including *The Wizard of Oz* and *Pinocchio*. Various puppeteers joined the company, each learning the Baird philosophy that if a puppeteer is anything, he must be versatile and he must be willing to adapt. The company also toured several productions, and Bil Baird’s Marionettes continued to make television appearances and commercials. Meanwhile, the operating costs of the Barrow Street theater continued to rise, and in 1978 The Bil Baird Theater closed.

Mary Martin, Abraham Lincoln, and Clark Gable; collection of Donald Rubin.
Bil, however, continued to create performances in other spaces. A revival of Stravinsky’s *L'Histoire du Soldat* was performed in 1982 at the 92nd Street Y Concert Series. The show was performed in 1984 and in 1986 as well. Baird’s son Peter served as the executive producer of the last incarnation of *L'Histoire*, having been a puppeteer in his father’s company since 1970.

Weakened by a long battle with bone marrow cancer, Bil Baird died of pneumonia on March 18, 1987 at the age of 82. However, his company endures, maintained by Peter, and it continues to perform shows conceived and designed by Bil Baird.

"He was incredible... The longer I’m around the business and do this myself and produce shows and the longer that he hasn’t been around, the more I come to appreciate who he was. The amount of energy and knowledge and talent that he had was incredible. Generally, I’ve found that a crew of five is capable of his output, from designers to directors to producers to lighting, set, that kind of thing. You really need quite a stage crew to equal what he would just go up and do himself."21

—Peter Baird
Endnotes

1 Bil Baird, interviewer unknown, Videotape recording, Puppeteers of America.

2 Ken Adelaide, "Bil Baird and Wife Are Parents of 800 Show-Business Puppets," Richmond Times Dispatch, 1951(?).


5 Pady Blackwood, interview by author, Tape recording, telephone conversation, Atlanta, Georgia, 5 November 1990.


7 Ibid.

8 Baird, The Art of the Puppet, 231.

9 Bil Baird, interview by Edward R. Murrow, on "Person to Person," 1952, Videotape recording of film, Puppeteers of America.

10 Baird, The Art of the Puppet, 27.

11 Peter Baird, interview by author, Tape recording, telephone conversation, Atlanta, Georgia, 7 November 1990.

12 Bil Baird, The Art of the Puppet, 234.

13 Bil Baird, Murrow interview.


16 Peter Baird, interview by author.


18 Blackwood, interview by author.


20 Bob Brown, speech delivered at Bil Baird memorial service, as reprinted in Puppetry Journal, Spring 1987, 54.

21 Peter Baird, interview by author.

Note: The photo captions in this catalog list those show titles with which the puppets photographed are most commonly associated. Extremely resourceful, Bil Baird frequently used the same puppets in many different shows.
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