"Fools, Jesters and Gods: The Role of the Clown in Puppet Theater"
courtesy of the

CENTER FOR PUPPETRY ARTS

April 22, to June 17, 1991

Southern Bell Center--East Lobby
The Center for Puppetry Arts Museum has been dedicated to presenting global puppetry traditions in its exhibitions for the past thirteen years. This exhibition brings together many diverse cultures and focuses on a common thread, a typical character found in most puppet shows, the clown. The clown plays an important role within a puppetry performance for he can say and do things that the ordinary person cannot. The clown can imitate and degrade people and animals, act the buffoon, engage in deviant word play, and exaggerate and caricature social and political conventions. The clown, by the very nature of his character, can mock us and make us laugh at ourselves. Because it is an inanimate object and only a material extension of a person the puppet can ridicule human behavior, beliefs and conventions.

Puppetry is an entertaining and important form of communication. The puppet is an interesting reflection of ourselves, our rituals, our social and political structures, our beliefs and our aesthetics. The puppet theater is a microcosm of the world in which we live and can thus provide great insight into our lives and our beliefs. Puppetry presents an alternate view of our landscape and when it satirizes and criticizes our institutions, it becomes a humorous and cathartic way to relieve ourselves of daily pressures.

Puppets can humor us in many ways. A puppet can take one aspect of a character and exaggerate it. For instance, a bottle filled with colored water can be inverted and evolve into a hand puppet representing a drunken fool, or when a puppet body of cloth and wood is joined with a human head the disjunction the audience perceives, a giant head on a diminutive body, becomes a boon for farce.

A rich clowning tradition is found in the puppetry of Indonesia, a tradition which has been in existence for over a thousand years. Semar is the chief clown who appears in these Hindu epic tales. He is said to be the oldest being in the universe and a god. His sons and grandson, including Petruk, Gareng and Bagong, provide great comedic presentations. Many of the clowns are half-male and half-female. The clowns are servants to the aristocratic heros, and are gods who hide their divinity behind a shield of low farce. Semar is proof that the common people are the power behind a kingdom.

Another famous puppet jester is Punch. The Punch and Judy tradition began with the Italian theater tradition commedia dell'arte. Punch was an impious satirical character who became immensely popular for his actions. Punch was the ultimate anti-hero. He could say and do things to his family, his landlord and his friends that we might secretly wish to do ourselves but never would for fear of imprisonment. Punch has been criticizing and satirizing politics for nearly 350 years, and his story has been adapted by many cultures. The French
call Punch "Polichinelle," the Germans "Kasper", the Dutch 
"Master Jakel", the Egyptians " Aragouz", the Greeks 
"Karaghiozis", and the Turkish "Karagoz".

The clown is a character found in all cultures. In some cases he might be a fool or a jester, he might be a wiseman with philosophical and metaphysical insights hidden behind his comedic responses, or he might be a god disguising himself behind a mask of low farce. When the clown meets the puppet theater, he is imbued with special power and insight. This puppet acts out the reflections and thoughts his controller or puppeteer has on our society. The puppet clown has a special power to make us laugh at his buffoonery, wonder at his magical movements, and think about his satirical comments on our lives and social and political structures.

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**EXHIBIT ITEMS**


2. **Male and Female Humanettes** (c.1950s). Rod puppets which used a human actor’s head. United States. Gift of the Caroline Lutz Collection, Westhampton College, University of Richmond.


This exhibition is currently touring the Southeast region of the United States. Unless otherwise noted, these puppets are part of the Center for Puppetry Arts Museum’s extensive permanent collection. Museum hours are Monday through Saturday, 9AM to 4PM. The Museum is closed on major holidays. Admission is $3 for adults, $2 for children under 14 years of age.

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