René
From Then Til Now

AN EXHIBIT AT THE CENTER FOR PUPPETRY ARTS

BY THOM FOUNTAIN
Quetzalcoatl, the Aztec god also known as the feathered serpent. This puppet was built for the "Domingo" television series in 1973 with costume designs and execution by Frank Paris.
The first time I heard the name René Zendelas was in 1973 while working as a puppeteer for Sid & Marty Krofft Productions at Six Flags over Georgia. One of my fellow puppeteers, Gary Griswell, had just returned from a trip to Los Angeles where he had spent a day in the company of René. Gary talked endlessly about the beautifully painted, exquisitely costumed and incredibly balanced puppets and the multicolored contoured controls crowning the tops of hundreds of marionettes.

In the summer of 1980, I decided to finally meet this puppeteer of puppeteers. Driving down a small street just a few blocks from the Disney Studios in Burbank, I came upon a red and yellow brick building adorned with gold letters informing me that this was René and His Artists Productions. René himself met me at the door and proceeded to introduce me to his world. Thus began a life-long friendship.

When Vincent Anthony, Executive Director of the Center for Puppetry Arts, approached me about doing an exhibit of René's work at the Center, I had no idea how big a project this was going to be. As I began researching through René's memoirs I found the backbone that made the man I know today. With each day the tales became more and more fascinating. The puppets I have looked at for years took on a different life. These were not just René's puppets: they were an extension of his soul and his incredible journey through life.

Thank you for taking the time to let us share with you the puppeteer who is so well-known in the puppetry community that he only goes by his first name: René.
as well as the marionette show performed by Foreman Brown, Harry Burnett and Roddy Brandon, better known as The Yale Puppeteers, beginning a lifelong friendship with the famous trio. Also during this period, René landed his first studio job – he built a caterpillar puppet for the MGM film “Yes Sir, That’s My Baby.”

The summer of 1946, René, now out of high school, performed shows while touring for the USO. Despite his years of experience, René said he entered this era of his show business life “very green.” Fortunately for him these shows employed seasoned veterans of the vaudeville stage. One of the acts, The McCune Sisters, took René under their wings and showed him the ways of the theater. In addition to learning how to take a proper bow, René learned the many superstitions of backstage, such as not putting your shoes on the dressing table and the famous no whistling backstage or the one closest to the door would be leaving the show.

René forgot this superstition one day and whistled while standing next to the dressing room door. A few days later while riding a streetcar in San Francisco he opened a letter from the draft board. He was out of the show and off to the army. “Call it a coincidence, but it happened,” he said.

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the next performance. He also made his television debut in 1950 on "Bozo's Circus."

In 1950, René joined forces with Muriel Polia to put together a puppet soap opera for Latino television in Los Angeles. The show never aired, but this endeavor gave birth to such puppets as Mamacita (later to become Spanish Rose), Papacito, his first singing trio of chickens, and Don Frijoles and El Diablo, the Palomino horse. From here the puppets became his first "Fiesta in Miniature," which he performed at The May Company for Corning Ware. This was the first time the act was called "René and His Continental Artists." (The title "Continental Artists" referred to the puppets themselves.)

In 1951, at the age of 24, René made his feature motion picture debut as a puppeteer in the film "I'll See You In My Dreams" starring Doris Day and Danny Thomas. This same year Beverly Morrel put together "The Hollywood Scandals" show for a seven-month tour of the Orient and signed René on as one of the acts.

While in Japan, René was introduced to the art forms of the Bunraku and Kabuki theaters.

When the tour ended, René performed at various theaters, including the Million Dollar Theater in Los Angeles and the Quiscosas in Santa Barbara. In 1952, René received a call to perform at a road house strip club outside of Phoenix, Arizona, called The Guys and Dolls. René was not too thrilled about this next venture, especially since it not only required him to perform his act, but he also had to MC the show and pick up the discarded clothing of the strippers. "I was terrified of microphones in those days and I detested having to pick up the stripper's clothes," he said.
In 1947, after a year of service in the army, René set out to secure employment in any way possible. Putting together a Latino act, René approached Señora de Bonzo, owner of the restaurant and club La Golondrina on Olvera Street in Los Angeles. Her first reaction was "A puppet show in here? Are you crazy?" After much persuasion, she reluctantly agreed to give René a one-week tryout. He stayed for three years. The contacts made during these three years assisted René in developing a highly polished act. Nick Navarro, the pianist at La Golondrina, composed and/or arranged René's original music. Lalo Robles became the voice of his Master of Ceremonies, Tito. Lalo's recordings are still used today. Other puppets whose life began during this period include: a new Bojangles tap dancer; the opera singer Madame Wigoletto; the piano act with Professor Psst; his stripper Gamine Divine; the serious Pagliacci; and the chanteuse Coco.

The exposure at La Golondrina led to many other bookings in Los Angeles, including ones at the Mason Opera House, the Million Dollar Theater, the Macayo with the Desi Arnez Orchestra and a private party hosted by Joan Crawford. Many nights René performed at two or more of these venues, packing the puppets in his car and driving across town to...
When he returned to Los Angeles, René performed his first commercial with Rhingold Beer on the Leo Carillo show using his original puppet Tito. (This contact would prove valuable when René moved to New York City.) He also made television appearances on "Fandango" and "Latin Cruise," and appeared at The Kings Supper Club in Santa Barbara with The Duncan Sisters.

The next adventure for "The Continental Artists" sent René to the land of his heritage – Mexico. From the beginning it was disastrous and proved to be the longest nine weeks
One day René sensed he needed a change and felt the best opportunities were in New York City. So in 1955, René loaded his green Ford Fairlane station wagon with every puppet act he had and started out for the Big Apple.

Insult to injury, his agent did not file the proper work papers and René was held by a government official and not allowed to perform. Unfortunately, the work visa problem could not be solved, but René managed to leave Mexico City with his puppets without further incident. Upon returning to the United States, René played Las Vegas for the first time at the El Cortez and The Showboat hotels.

One day René sensed he needed a change and felt the best opportunities were in New York City. So in 1955, much to the dismay of his parents, René loaded his green Ford Fairlane station wagon with every puppet act he had and started out for the Big Apple. With the help of his friend Ann Nichols he managed to book clubs along the route, including clubs in Houston, Birmingham and Atlanta. However, his Atlanta engagement never happened. René loaded his puppets into the club only to return that evening to find that the sheriff had padlocked the club. René spent the next several days living at the YMCA and dealing with the sheriff’s department to claim his wares. He was eventually successful and headed straight for New York.

As soon as he arrived in New York, René immediately set out to find an agent. This proved to be tougher than he thought, and he was turned down by everyone. Remembering how he had landed his first club job at La Golondrina in Los Angeles, René approached the owners of The Chateau Madrid. Once again, just as Señora De Bonzo had said many years earlier, the response was, “Puppets in a night club?” They gave René a one-week tryout and he ended up playing there several months as one of the longest running acts of The Chateau Madrid, after Spanish dancer Carmen Amaya.

Grace Salter, a very powerful New York agent, caught René’s act at The Chateau Madrid and arranged for him to audition at the apartment of one of the most popular celebrities on TV, Ed Sullivan. Mr. Sullivan immediately signed René.
on for an appearance. René was actually booked for several appearances but, due to unfortunate circumstances, he only performed once.

Immediately after his appearance on the Ed Sullivan Show, René boarded the SS Brazil for a 45-day cruise bound for Buenos Aires. He was recognized from his appearance on the Ed Sullivan show and was an immediate hit on board.

When he returned to New York, Grace booked René at the 500 Club in Atlantic City with Tony Martin and Vic Damone; The Chez Paree in Montreal, Quebec; and the Statler Hiltons, which included hotels in Detroit, Pittsburgh and San Juan, Puerto Rico.

The original Tito was used until 1955, including work as the spokesman for Rhingold Beer. An updated version of Tito was made in 1959 and is still in use today.
By 1957, René had tired of New York. He received a call from a friend who needed René’s help with a television pilot he was producing in Los Angeles. “That was the excuse I needed to leave,” he said. René headed home.

The pilot never materialized. Instead, René headed to the Riverside Hotel in Reno, Nevada, to appear as a “dry act” in an ice show. This experience gave him the idea for an ice skating puppet, Aurora, which he built upon returning home from the Reno engagement in 1959. This led to another ice production in Anchorage, Alaska, in 1960, only this time René donned the ice skates after taking lessons from Ronnie Plank. During these performances with the ice shows, René met figure skaters Ken Kane and Denny Parr, both of whom would later become members of his company.

In 1961, Frank Sennes asked René to perform at the Moulin Rouge in Hollywood on the same bill with one of the hottest comedians of the day, Sophie Tucker.

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René had heard of Ms. Tucker’s reputation of being extremely difficult to work with, but he found out first-hand how impossible she could be. On the first night he performed his full act and was
very well received. On the second night he arrived to learn that he had to cut his act down, the excuse being that the act was running too long. For the next four nights, his act was cut down until it was practically nothing. Later that same week he came to work to find his puppets packed and he was asked to leave the show. He was replaced with a magic act of mediocre quality. “She never said a word to me this whole time. I found out through Frank that Ms. Tucker wanted me out of there because the act was too popular,” he said.

Réné’s last Las Vegas nightclub appearance was in 1962 at the Desert Inn with Phil Harris, an appearance Réné calls “the best show and most fun I ever had in my life. It was the first time I felt I had really hit it big.” Unlike his experience with Ms. Tucker, Réné received super-star treatment by Mr. Harris, who he says “was the nicest guy in the world…a real sweetheart.” Réné recalls one evening when his parents took their first plane trip to see their son perform with Phil Harris. “Phil stopped the show to introduce my parents to the audience. I still get a little teary-eyed when I think of it.” Réné considered this four-week run to be the zenith of his career.
A COMPANY IS BORN

Up to this point René basically worked alone, but this was about to change. Richard Stoll and Talbot Lewis were producing a TV show that taught children about manners by using two love bug type characters. The show itself never materialized, but the two insect puppets set the stage for "The Nutcracker," one of René's biggest successes. Produced for The American Puppet Theater, René built a small group of flower and insect puppets and was assisted in performance by Jack and Jackie Shafton and the Kramers. Although the show used the ballet music by Tchaikovsky, it was set in a magical garden during springtime. The show was a huge success and would grow from just "The Nutcracker Suite" to a full concert show staged by Ken Kane. This was the beginning of "René and His Artists Productions." (The name "Continental" was dropped in 1963 since René was no longer performing out of the country.) Over the course of ten years this production would more than pay for itself. In 1961, it appeared at the Seattle World's Fair, playing opposite to Sid & Marty Krofft's highly touted adult puppet show "Les Poupees de Paris," and garnered better reviews than the Krofft extravaganza.

![René (middle) and his first teacher Bob Baker (left) and company member Ron Martin (right) performing the poodle "Can Can" from "Le Grand Cirque" in the Ahmanson Theater at the Los Angeles Music Center in 1976.](image)
In 1966, "The Nutcracker" appeared on television in "The Hollywood Palace." The show played its last performance at the Laguna Arts Festival in the summer of 1970. Unfortunately, many of the puppets were destroyed by rodents while in storage.

**THE CONCERT SHOWS 1960-1970**

By this time René was in such demand that he was paying commissions to three agents. Agent number four, Erlene "Smitty" Smith, became the exclusive agent for the new René and His Artists Productions and booked the company at the famous Laguna Arts Festival in Laguna Beach, California. This engagement gave the company much-needed growth and exposure. The concert shows from this decade include: a full scale version of "Fiesta in Miniature," "The Toyshop Fantastique" set to Tchaikovsky's "Sleeping Beauty," "Le Grand Cirque," and "Mardi Gras." With the exception of "Le Grand Cirque," these shows would play an off-Broadway type performance at the Vallejo County Fair and then move in for the summer run at the Laguna Arts Festival. Once again the shows were a huge success, with the exception of "The Toyshop Fantastique" — its highly stylized form never really gelled and was shelved after one season. However, this production was the first to be produced entirely in a new plastic, neoprene, which René introduced to the puppet world.

Up until this time René's puppets had been made from the conventional materials of marionette artists - hand-carved wood, plastic wood or wood dough and mannequin rubber, which had a very short life.

▲ Princess Aurora and Prince from "The Toyshop Fantastique," circa 1967. This was René’s least favorite show and he stored it after one season. It was, however, the first show made entirely from neoprene plastic.
span. René wanted to find another material which would be durable, last without becoming dry and brittle and have the porcelain smooth finish he demanded. This search lead him to the Los Angeles Museum of Natural History. Neoprene was being used at the time by paleontologists to create missing dinosaur bones for their exhibits. He learned how to cure the liquid plastic compound which, with its near flawless finish, would reduce the time spent on the sanding process. When color was applied in lacquer paint, the result was a near-perfect finish, a necessity for on-camera puppetry. To this day neoprene remains the backbone of René’s marionette production.

THE MCDONALDLAND YEARS 1971-1988

René was called upon by Jack Shalton to perform hamburger puppets for the new campaign geared toward children for the McDonald’s Corporation. Eventually, René and His Artists would be awarded the contract to build new puppets, not only of the talking hamburgers, but also the long-haired creatures known as The Fry Guys. The Fry Girls, also made by René, were introduced in 1988. The group of puppets would become known as “The Fry Kids.”

This adventure in McDonaldland became a very lucrative endeavor for René and his company, since puppeteers were now recognized by the Screen Actors Guild as on-camera principal talent and entitled to residual payments each time the commercials were aired. Unfortunately, with the advent of Computer Generated Image (CGI), the puppets were retired in 1988, bringing to a close a 17-year relationship with the McDonald’s Corporation.

“DOMINGO” 1971-1979

Puppets were now a mainstay for children’s television, so when a group of producers wanted to create a bilingual show for the Los Angeles area, who better to ask than a Spanish speaking puppeteer of Mexican decent? With principal characters Chivo and Chavo, “Domingo” enjoyed a seven-year, 75 episode run and received the NAPTE Award of
Excellence in 1973 and The Ohio State Award in 1974. For this production, René built many original characters and used some puppets from his concert series. His new studio, which he moved into in 1974 and still occupies today, was bustling with activity, especially when the production began filming in the puppet studio itself for the last two years. After filming ceased, Chivo and Chavo hosted "Le Grande Cirque" on a promotional mall tour which ran for several years.

AMUSEMENT PARKS
1977-1995

René had a brief engagement at Six Flags Magic Mountain in Valencia, California, before being contacted by the entertainment directors of Knott's Berry Farm in Buena Park, California. René, along with company member Ron Martin, performed his "Fiesta" show for the Mexican Village section of the park. Like so many times in the past, it was supposed to be a limited run, but the company performed there for the next eight years. After the first season René and company would perform different variety type shows from his well-stocked warehouse and move to different areas of the park each season. During this period many new

▲ Chivo and Chavo, circa 1971, the stars of the Emmy-award winning children's show "Domingo". The show enjoyed a seven-year run on television.
craftsmen and puppeteers became members of René’s puppeteering "family." In addition to work for Knotts Berry Farm, in 1980 the company began a two-year run at the world famous San Diego Zoo with the all-animal production of "Zoopendous." This was followed in 1991 with "The Barnyard Frolics" for Remlinger Farms in Carnation, Washington, which enjoyed a four-year run.

TELEVISION, FILM AND COMMERCIALS

Although René had performed small roles in films such as "I'll See You In My Dreams," the demands for his expertise increased as puppet effects in film were becoming more and more popular. In 1980, René created the grandfather bat, Gregor, for the TV pilot "Mr. and Mrs. Dracula" starring Dick Shawn and Carol Lawrence. Unfortunately, the pilot had the misfortune of coming along during the time of the writer’s strike and was never picked up as a series. He was also responsible for creating the Pillsbury Doughboy for the Pillsbury sponsored TV special "Mark Wilson’s Magic Circus." This was the only time Poppin’ Fresh was animated as a puppet.

He created and performed the marionettes for the horror film "Ben," and puppeteered the koala in the movie "Ford Fairlane." In 1998, René built an exact replica of Howdy Doody for the film "Man On the Moon" starring Jim Carrey, and which was based on the life of comedian Andy Kaufman. This project reunited

René with his dear friend Velma Dawson, the creator of the original Howdy Doody, who supervised the construction.
In television, René's work has been seen in such hit shows as "Columbo," "Bob Hope Specials," "St. Elsewhere," "Murder She Wrote" and "Family Matters." The countless commercials include "Pepto Bismol" with El Professor (currently running in Spanish-speaking markets), and spots for Southwest and Continental Airlines, Burger King and Budweiser Beer.

At present, the studio, with shop foreman Doug Seymore, continues to create new characters for its live performances as well as for TV and film. René and His Artists Productions still survives at a time when puppetry in film leans toward high-tech effects and computer generated images. However, René is still called upon by these "high-tech" puppet houses for advice because no matter how far puppetry moves technically, it cannot eradicate itself from its roots. Therefore, René will always be in demand. The studio shows no signs of slowing down.

As René has said time and time again, "I love what I'm doing and I'm doing it because I love it. I have thoroughly enjoyed my life. If I had to do it all over again I wouldn't change a thing."

\[During the summer of 1999, after a nineteen-year absence, René (age 71) returned to the Forum Theater, which he helped design in 1969, at the Laguna Arts Festival.\]
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>MASTER ANTONIO, 1939.</th>
<th>René's sick bed toy from his mother, Elvira de la Fuente, in December. An original Stensgard puppet purchased in 1939 for $1.50.</th>
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<tr>
<td>DRUNKEN SAILOR, 1941.</td>
<td>This puppet was never really used until 1972 when it was redressed as it appears today for the feature film “Ben”. Wood dough and fabric.</td>
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<tr>
<td>ORIGINAL ACT - CLOWN, MISTER BOJANGLES, OPERA SINGER, 1941.</td>
<td>The original tap shoes for Mister Bojangles, now lost, were autographed by Bill “Bojangles” Robinson after he caught René's act. Plastic wood.</td>
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<tr>
<td>CHICKENS, 1951.</td>
<td>Originally made for a Latino television show with Muriel Polia, they eventually became a part of René's nightclub act. Many sets have been made over the years with the newer trios performing today as The Fowler Sisters.</td>
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MADAME WIGOLETTO - OPERA SINGER, 1947.
Plastic wood and carved wood.

COCO, 1947.
Chanteuse. This character was modeled after singer Josephine Premise. Wood dough.

AURORA, 1959.
Ice skater. Created for an ice show in Anchorage, Alaska. René donned skates to perform with her on the ice surface. Carved pine body and wood dough.

GENINE DIVINE, 1949.
Stripper. Genine is capable of removing and throwing the various articles of clothing. Carved poplar body and wood dough head.

Tap dancer. Wood dough with actual taps on shoes.

MAMBO DANCERS, 1949.
Female and male puppets. Carved wood and wood dough.

PAGLIACCI, 1948.
This puppet is equipped with actual working tear ducts. Note the plastic collar to repel water. This puppet was only used for three performances at La Golondrina. Wood dough. Puppet on loan, courtesy of the Gary Busk collection.

PROFESSOR PSSST, 1947.
Pianist with piano. Wood dough, carved wood and latex.

All costumes for René's nightclub act were designed and executed by his mother, Elvira de la Fuente.
CONDUCTOR, 1960.
Modeled after René’s Professor Pst piano player. He conducted the overtures not only for the “Nutcracker,” but also every live concert show until 1970.

MME. BUTTERFLOVA, 1960.
The Sugar Plum Fairy. Plastic, carved wood and wood dough.

BATIMA BELLY BUG, 1960.
Carved wood and wood dough.

SHAH PSHAW MOSQUITO, 1960.
Carved wood, plastic and plastic wood.

Wood dough and plastic.

SPIDER LEGREE, 1960.
Carved wood dough, plastic and felt.

Plastic, wood dough and marabou.

DAISY ROOTBOUND - PRIMA BALLERINA, 1960.
Wood dough, carved wood and mannequin rubber.

“The Nutcracker” was René’s first success as a multiple-member company. Using the Tchaikovsky Christmas score, but set in a garden at springtime, this production played for more than 10 years on stage as well as numerous television appearances. All costuming designed and executed by Elvira de la Fuente.
BULL FIGHTER AND BULL, 1965.
Hand carved wood, wood dough, plastic and neoprene.

LA CALACA (SEÑORITA SKELETON), 1965.
Carved wood dough.

MARACA BREAKAWAY SKELETON, 1965.
Neoprene plastic.

CUCARACHAS, 1965.
Neoprene and wood dough.

CARLITOS, 1947.
Carved pine and wood dough.

Wood dough, carved pine and neoprene.

SPANISH ROSE (BEGAN HER CAREER AS MAMACITA), 1950.
Carved pine and wood dough.

PANCHO, 1947.
Carved pine and wood dough.

Carved pine, wood dough and fleece fabric.

MARGARITA, 1947.
Carved pine and wood dough. Hand sequined by Elvira de la Fuente.

All costuming for “Fiesta” by Elvira de la Fuente.
Neoprene plastic.

Two puppets with stage one and stage two. The Grand Turk puppets appear in stage one as a single puppet. This trick marionette actually consists of five flip-type puppets (stage two) which would appear at the end of the act. Early grand turk controls only allowed minimum movement of the stage one character. René redesigned the control to include a working leg bar as well as mouth and eye animation in stage one before the puppet would break into the five individual flip puppets of stage two. Neoprene and wood dough.

This puppet, as well as the entire cast of "Toyshop," was the first production to be made completely from neoprene plastic.

The "bad joking" co-host of "Zoopendous," which enjoyed a two-year run at the San Diego Zoo. Foam and fabric. Constructed by Pat Brymer.

ORIGIANL TITO, 1947.
Plastic wood.

INSPECTOR LE CHAT, 1996.

ORIGINAL HAMBURGER FROM MCDONALD'S COMMERCIALS, 1971.
Carved foam constructed by Pat Brymer.

Latex and eurothane. This was the only puppet ever made of the animated character. Puppet and clip of performance courtesy of Mark Wilson.

CHIVO AND CHAVO FROM "DOMINGO," 1968.
Chivo and Chavo hosted "Domingo" for seven years and 75 episodes. Carved pine and wood dough.
EL PROFESSOR FOR PEPTO BISMOL, 1985 TO PRESENT.
Patterned foam and fleece constructed by Pat Brymer. Costume by Doug Seymore. Permission granted courtesy of Mark Huffman of Proctor and Gamble.

COBERLY FORD CAR, 1977.
Permission granted courtesy of Mrs. Myrtis Butler. Foam, plastic and neoprene skin.

LLORONA FROM "DOMINGO", 1971.
Neoprene.

CARLSBAD, 1998.
Caricature of actor Reginald Vel Johnson as Carl Winslow from "Family Matters," episode "Stevil II". Ventriloquist figure made of neoprene and muslin. Puppet on loan courtesy of Reginald Vel Johnson.

Neoprene and wood dough. Costume designed and executed by Frank Paris. This puppet has never been used in performance.

BRUJA, 1948.
Costume by Elvira de la Fuente. Carved pine and wood dough.

BURGER FROM THE "BURGER KING" TRAVELING SHOW, 1969.
Neoprene.

Neoprene with flocking.

Replica created and manipulated by Rene for the film "Man On The Moon" directed by Milos Forman. Entire puppet construction was supervised by Velma Dawson, creator of the original Howdy Doody. Permission granted by Universal Studios. Carved pine, wood dough and neoprene.

SELF SCULPTURE WITH SKELETON, 1949.
Carved pine and wood dough. Created for Rene's nightclub act toward the end of his run at La Golodrina in Los Angeles.
I would like to take this opportunity to thank Vincent Anthony, Susan Kinney and the entire staff at the Center for Puppetry Arts. The Center's mission is to remember the past, teach the present and explore the future – a mission it fulfills each day. Thank you for the opportunity to share an important artist of our puppeteering past, present and future.

Sincerely,

Thom Fountain
Exhibit Curator

We would like to acknowledge the following people whose talents have contributed to the success of René and His Artists Productions.

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Denny Parr
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