

# 2019-2020 Annual Report



### A YEAR LIKE NO OTHER



As I write this letter, I am struck by how uniquely different this report is when compared to those in prior years. For the first time, this letter is written by someone other than our Founder and former Executive Director, Vincent Anthony. With a legacy spanning over forty years, Vince leaves the Center to enter (semi) retirement, confident in the impact of his vision to our city and to the international puppetry community. Throughout his career leading the Center, he has won numerous awards as a community and arts leader, and most importantly has won the hearts of generations of children across the Southeast. It is my honor to take the baton and care for that legacy into the future, and I am appreciative of the precious time he has spent with me during this transition. Thank you, Vince, for everything.

The 2019-2020 fiscal year began with excitement as we launched the Center's 41st Season—renewing the organization's commitment to inspire new and returning patrons with its unique, holistic blend of presenting fully-staged theatrical puppetry performances, conducting hands-on, interactive workshops, and exhibiting our growing collection of museum artifacts. The summer saw the Center's theaters filled with families enjoying theatrical performances and reveling in nostalgia during the '80s Family Film Festival weekend, and the Atrium transformed into the mystical world of Thra to celebrate the release of *The Dark Crystal: Age of Resistance* with The Dark Crystal Ball.

As the autumn of 2019 arrived in Atlanta, enthusiastic fans flocked to the Center to engage with the arts and celebrate milestones such as Jim Henson's (and the Center's) birthday with a Henson Cosplay Day in September, *Sesame Street*'s 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary in November, and of course, the holiday season with the return of the Center's *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*<sup>TM</sup> Family Series production.

The puppetry community and kids of every age mourned the passing of Caroll Spinney in December 2019. The Center honored our friend by moving his two most recognizable characters, Oscar the Grouch and Big Bird, together in our Jim Henson Gallery where they can share the story of Mr. Spinney and his tremendous impact on *Sesame Street* and his friend, Jim Henson.

The 2020 year started well with over 20,000 audience members joining us in the rainforest canopy to attend the world-premiere Family Series production of *Stellaluna*, based on Janell Cannon's award-winning children's book. With financial support from the Georgia Council for the Arts and the creative contributions of Burgess-Peterson Academy's 2<sup>nd</sup> grade classes, the Center created its largest set to date, allowing audience members to watch Stellaluna—a fruit bat—and the other creatures of the Gambian rainforest fly freely amongst the trees. After *Stellaluna*'s seven-week run,

family audiences came to the Center to be mesmerized by Alex & Olmsted's innovative *Milo the Magnificent*, and adult and teen audiences experienced grief and the unconditional love of a dog through *New Owner*, performed by the Australian company The Last Great Hunt. By the middle of March, the Center had welcomed over 100,000 visitors through its doors, including over 50,000 children who came to the Center on field trips with their schools, daycares, and other community groups.

In March of 2020, and for the first time since 1978, the Center was forced to cancel all onsite programming; its theaters fell dark, its classrooms emptied, and its artifacts sat isolated from their adoring patrons. However, with crisis comes innovation, and with creativity and inspiration as key components of the Center's mission, the Center's award-winning Digital Learning team ramped up their studios and quickly brought live, interactive puppet shows and workshops to children isolated at home around the world. Through the newly minted Center@Home program, our creative teams across the Center were able to offer free and low-cost performances, workshops, museum tours, and educational segments designed to blend puppetry arts with educational content in a virtual format. By the end of May 2020, the Center had produced and shared over 100 hours of free content with over 200,000 households all across the United States and in 88 countries around the world, leading *Atlanta Magazine* to include the Center in its Best of 2020 List as the city's "Best Home Edutainment" option.

With the support of Center staff, the guidance and leadership of the Board, and the financial support of all of our generous donors, we were able to use the slower time resulting from the pandemic to incubate ideas for when the Center reopened. We are optimistic and excited about our future! We adapted much of the Center's regular programming so we could begin offering and selling it in a digital format for the first time to the public, and we developed the rigorous cleaning and social distancing protocols that would enable us to begin a phased reopening beginning in the late summer of 2020. Our successes were hard-earned, but as spring yielded to summer once more, the Center began to think less of what we <u>couldn't</u> do and more of what we <u>will</u> do to engage with our fans and patrons in this "new normal."

In the end, FY19-20 proved to be a chaotic, uncertain year for everyone, but it also proved to be a transformational year for the Center by revealing its strength and resilience. Perhaps that shouldn't come as a surprise. After all, Vince chose to build the Center in Atlanta because he saw something special here; every flame needs a catalyst, and for this city, artistic expression serves as an ethereal spark. Atlanta is the city of resurgence. We continue to rebuild and renew ourselves after each crisis, and this one shall be no different. Similarly, by adapting to meet the future head-on, the Center was able to serve the community and remain an essential part of Atlanta's artistic landscape. So, on behalf of the Center's staff and Board of Directors, thank you for helping us get through this tumultuous year. With your support, the Center's creative spark endures.

Sincerely,

Jeth

# IMAGINATION

Following nearly two years in design and development, *Stellaluna*, based on the best-selling children's book by Janell Cannon, made its debut at the Center for Puppetry Arts. Ms. Cannon graciously traveled to Atlanta from San Francisco for a series of press events, a book signing, and a special performance followed by a Q&A with the audience, moderated by the Center's Artistic Director, Jon Ludwig.

As part of the development of *Stellaluna*, the Center continued the collaborative tradition of bringing thought-provoking and imaginative programming to young minds through its partnership with Atlanta Public Schools' Burgess-Peterson Academy. Collaborations on productions such as *Stellaluna* foster creative exploration around narrative themes through myriad lenses, including reading and reflection activities that build meaningful connections between students and the source material, while exploring the themes of identity and acceptance.

Earlier in the season, the Center presented an eighties-style urban take on the classic tale of *Beauty and the Beast* and took audiences on an educational intergalactic adventure with *SPACE!* Critically-acclaimed visiting artists Alex and Olmsted of Maryland ignited creativity and curiosity with their popular production of *Milo the Magnificent*, and the Center brought frights and delights to audiences of all ages during the Halloween season with *The Legend of Sleepy Silly Hollow* by the Frogtown Mountain Puppeteers of Maine, as well as the Center's own *The Ghastly Dreadfuls* for adults 18+. It was a year filled with fresh, unique, and stellar productions.

The Museum also increased the scope of its programming. Wiggle Wednesdays, the Museum Department's weekly programming for toddlers, offered unique sensory and narrative experiences for young ones and their families to explore the world of puppetry. By combining music, movement, crafts, games, and puppet-led storytelling, this program is a unique example of the Center's mission-infused programming. The Museum also worked with *Sesame Street Live* to bring part of the touring company to the Center for a special. Members of the cast came to the Center along with body puppets, Elmo and Grover. The sold-out evening included singing, dancing, puppet-making, and a photo op with the characters.

For adults, the Museum brought fans of *The Dark Crystal* into the expansive fantasy world of the film through the special exhibition: *Jim Henson's The Dark Crystal: Worlds of Myth and Magic.* Museum-goers got an inclusive look behind the scenes at how Jim Henson developed the story, as well as its impact and enduring legacy. To celebrate the exhibition, the Center invited fans to attend The Dark Crystal Ball, an immersive event that transformed the Center into the fantasy world of Thra.



# EDUCATION

As a learning space, the Center is distinctive in weaving together the history, culture, and craft of puppetry to create unique learning experiences for every visitor. This extends beyond the Center's physical location by way of Digital Learning programs, making one-of-a-kind experiences like the *Worlds of Puppetry Museum* accessible to anyone across the world through digital tours.

Create-A-Puppet Workshops™, one of the Center's flagship offerings, give participants of all ages the opportunity to build their own puppet alongside our friendly and knowledgeable staff. Of note, among these experiences this year was A Pickle of Pink Elephants: The Atlanta Beltline Lantern Parade Puppet Workshop, where adult enthusiasts assembled elephant rod puppets with animated trunks! These workshops promote hands-on learning and accompany many of the Center's productions throughout the season.





The Center continued its history of collaborative learning and outreach with partnerships between Burgess-Peterson Academy, Girl Scouts STEM Days programming, and by building sensory-friendly experiences for neurodiverse individuals with learning differences or ASD. By taking individual differences into account, the Center expanded the reach of educational programming beyond neurotypical audiences and facilitated tailored experiences grounded in inclusion and accessibility.



# COMMUNITY GLOBAL, LOCAL

In June, the Center was honored to present the Chen His-Huang Puppet Troupe of Taipei, Taiwan, led by a fifth-generation master puppeteer. This company is considered a national treasure in Taiwan, presenting a dazzling display of puppet martial arts and acrobatics. In addition to the performance, the Center also hosted a reception for the Mayor of Taipei in celebration of the 40th anniversary of the Taipei-Atlanta Sister Cityhood.

Community connections allowed the Center to bring unique puppetry experiences to a plethora of audiences and strengthen its network of support with the local community, nationally and beyond. The Center connected with the global community through diverse programming, allowing audiences to experience where culture and puppetry intersect. *Discovery Days: Discover Europe* invited patrons to explore folktales from England and Italy, as well as learn about French puppetry styles in a hands-on Puppet Creation Station experience.





The Center remained active in the Atlanta community with a presence at Dragon Con 2019, bringing the rich history of Jim Henson's impact on the world of puppetry to convention-goers in innovative ways. Representation at local events included the East Atlanta Village Strut and the Children's Healthcare of Atlanta Christmas Parade where the Center's new Phoenix puppet made public appearances. The Center also supported Macy's Believe campaign and their Make-A-Wish Foundation by participating in Fair Saturday (an international initiative to have artists/arts organizations donate profits from revenue earned the Saturday after Thanksgiving to human service organizations around the world).

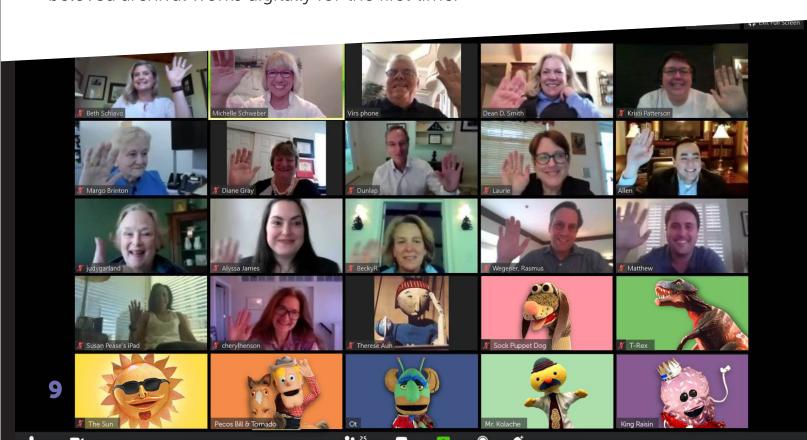
Thanks to a generous grant from The Coca-Cola Foundation, the Center was able to offer 3,388 students deeply-discounted (and in some cases, free) admissions via the Field Trip Fund. Additionally, The Coca-Cola Foundation was the presenting sponsor of the Center's Sensory-Friendly Sundays in 2020, enabling over 800 patrons and their families to visit the Center and enjoy a supportive and welcoming environment for individuals with sensory-processing conditions (such as Autism Spectrum Disorder).

# THE PIVOT

With the unprecedented challenges brought on by COVID-19, the Center explored new opportunities to serve our audiences. *Stellaluna* closed just before the start of the pandemic. To protect the community and the staff, the Center closed its doors in March and shifted exclusively to digital learning and experiences.

Knowing that many parents and children were homebound, the Center moved quickly to provide free programming through our Digital Learning platform and social media, producing over one hundred digital programs watched by over 200,000 people across 89 different countries in just two months. Many of these programs were free in an effort to support families at a time of uncertainty and fear.

As the pandemic continued, the Center brought in visiting artists as well as artists-in-residence to offer online puppet shows and curriculum-based workshops. The Center also moved its archival library online, offering some of the exciting and beloved archival works digitally for the first time.







Safety Dog returned to facilitate education and understanding around the Center's coronavirus response.

In addition, *Pete the Cat* author James Dean, *Stellaluna* author Janell Cannon, and *Ruth and the Green Book* author Calvin Ramsey were kind enough to join the Center for several Zoom events that included the archival screening of the puppet shows followed by Q&A sessions with the authors.

The Center's pandemic response included the return of Safety Dog, a wonderful character initially created in partnership with DeKalb County CEO Burrell Ellis, with support from the county's Board of Commissioners, School System and Public Library, alongside The Humana Foundation. Conceived as a response to the 2008 H1N1 outbreak, Safety Dog returned with an announcement to highlight precautions the Center implemented to mitigate the spread of COVID-19.

In April, the Center hosted a virtual town hall for the puppetry field to explore the impact that COVID-19 was having on American puppeteers. As a unique example of our values in action, this forum was instrumental to the Center living its mission to support the people behind the puppets. That same month, the *Atlanta Journal-Constitution* ran an article highlighting the Center's streaming performances and expanded lineup of digital learning activities and workshops. The exposure provided the Center with opportunities to bring programming directly to audiences while simultaneously creating new pathways for exposure and support worldwide. During this crisis, the Center was particularly grateful for the significant financial support from The Jim Henson Foundation.

# OUR VALUES

Inspire every generation

Provide artistic experiences

**Unlock imagination** 

Promote the inspiring magic of puppetry

Support the people behind the puppets

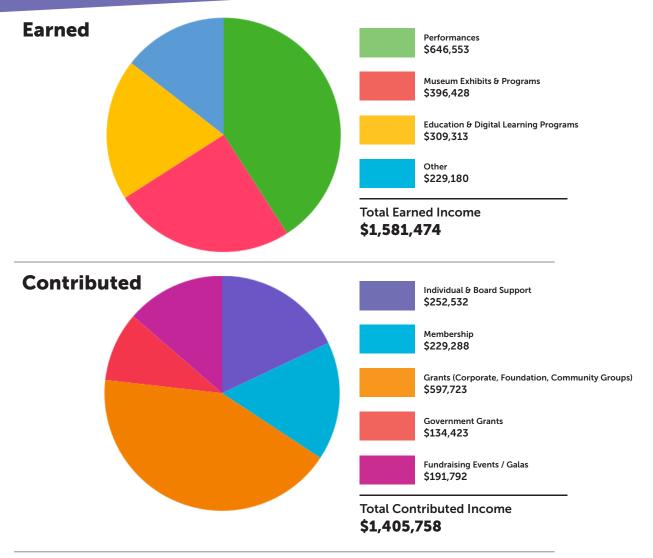








### REVENUE

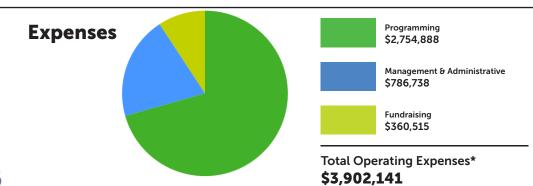


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\$217,053

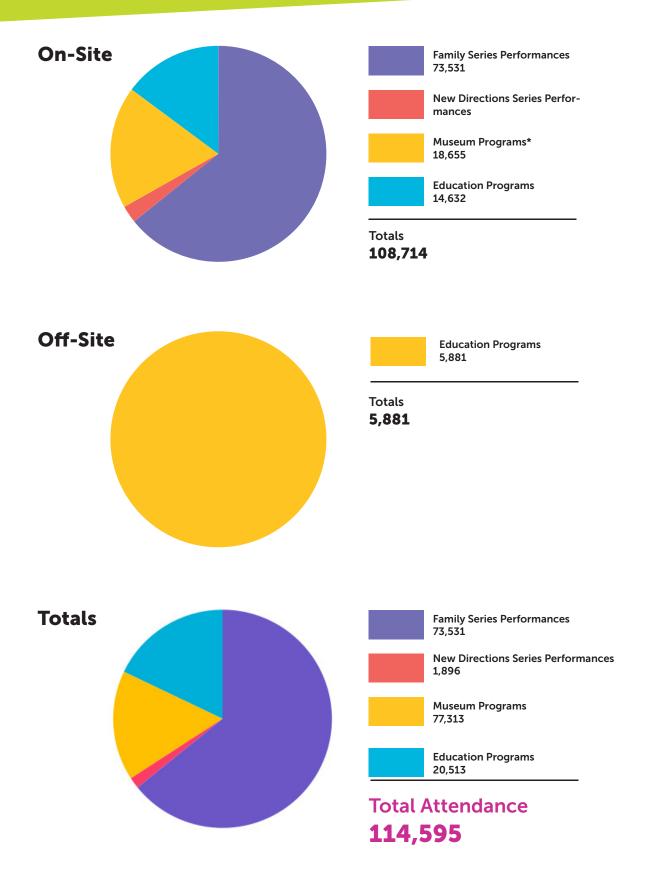
Endowment & Other Funds Released for Operations **\$100,000** 

### Total Operating Income \$3,304,285



15

### **ATTENDANCE**



<sup>\*</sup>Museum offsite attendance is Jul-Aug 2018 estimate for airport exhibit. Exhibit closed Sep 2018 due to airport construction.

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