

2020–2021

Annual Report

Turning COVID's Chaos into Magic



When I first arrived at the Center, I was impressed by the amount of planning and coordination that went into developing and producing a full year of programming. The Center's program offerings—the Family Series and the New Directions Series performance schedules, the rotation of museum artifacts and the curation of special exhibits, the classes offered in the Explore Puppetry and Junior Explorers workshop series, our Digital Learning classroom offerings and the design and creation of the unique puppets featured in our Create-a-Puppet Workshops™—are imagined over a year in advance. It can take several years to write, build and fully develop a production on our stages, and in order to keep our

museum experiences new and exciting, the collection acquisition, conservation, staging and writing processes can take years to realize. The resulting experience excites teachers and their classes to book field trips to the Center or Digital Learning sessions for their classrooms, determines when our teaching artists can offer special outreach programming or participate in annual thespian conventions, and inspires the special events we offer for members, donors, and admirers alike. Unfortunately, all of that planning—the vision for our 2020 and 2021 programming—was thrown into chaos by COVID in the spring of 2020. For the first time in the history of the Center, our theaters were dark and our hallways were empty as we began our fiscal year 2020-21 and our 42nd season.

In the face of COVID, our staff quickly adapted the Center's traditional programming into a digital form, including digital performances, workshops, classroom visits, artist-in-residence experiences, puppet-led story times, and virtual Museum tours. Our talented program leaders also created uniquely curated Zoom events that appealed to audiences of all ages. This blend of virtual programming continued even as the Center reopened the *Worlds of Puppetry Museum* in July 2020 with rigorous cleaning and social distancing protocols in place. In the months that followed, hundreds of families from across the country traveled to Atlanta and visited our museum after being introduced to the Center through the magic of our virtual programming. Meanwhile, in addition to offering our regular Digital Learning programming, we collaborated with Varsity Tutors to provide 2,225 children with live, educational virtual programming at no cost and gave 10,000 more children across the globe the opportunity to experience our pre-recorded performances through the Varsity Tutors platform.

While the increased virtual programming generated revenue, the Center's COVID-19 closure led to dramatic earned revenue losses that could not be fully offset through fundraising efforts and supplemental government funding. With furloughs and temporary reductions in hours and pay, we maintained a balanced budget through the pandemic, ensuring the longevity of the organization and enabling it to reemerge financially intact. As revenue increased in the first quarter of FY20-21, we prioritized bringing back furloughed creative staff, enabling us to incubate creative development ideas

and to partner with other local cultural organizations. Notably, our artistic team collaborated with The Atlanta Opera, providing advice on design and performance techniques for their first post-shutdown performance, *Pagliacci*, and designing and building over 30 puppets for their deconstructed adaptation of the Weill and Brecht classic, *The Threepenny Opera*.

We started the fiscal year unsure if COVID would allow us to open our theater doors, but by November of 2020, we confidently presented our first in-person theatrical production on our mainstage, *Stan the Lovesick Snowman*. Having the luxury of the talented married puppeteer team of Amy and Tim Sweeney, we safely delivered a reprieve for families to experience the magic of the Center during a very challenging time.

Similarly, in November our education team began welcoming back our guests to become artists and performers through our Create-a-Puppet Workshops™. With one-time use instructions and pre-made materials kits spaced out to allow for social distancing, patrons built and decorated their own Stan the Lovesick Snowman rod puppets, followed by the opportunity to bring their unique creations to life on one of the Center's classroom stages.

After a few theatrical "dark" months at the beginning of 2021, we began offering onsite performances and Create-a-Puppet Workshops™ once again in March 2021. By limiting ticket sales and requiring patrons to wear masks, we were able to mesmerize audiences in our Downstairs Theater through the end of our fiscal year. Our expectation for attendance at these shows was uncertain at best, so it came as a delight and surprise when we exceeded many of our internal projections, providing close to 5,500 audience members the opportunity to attend one of our 157 live, in-person puppetry performances.

As the fiscal year closed, we presented a new special exhibition, *Masterpiece of Puppetry: Dark Crystal: Age of Resistance*, to the public. Building off the popularity of the Museum's previous award-winning special exhibition, *Jim Henson's The Dark Crystal: World of Myth and Magic*, this new exhibition explored how The Jim Henson Company continued the name-sake's legacy of revolutionizing the art of puppetry for the popular Netflix series. At our Member/Donor preview event held on June 17, 2021, guests watched as Russ Vick, our Museum Conservator, offered a hands-on look at some of the materials and techniques used to conserve the puppets donated by The Jim Henson Company.

COVID brought immeasurable change and uncertainty to our communities, yet in spite of this disruption, the Center staff's unwavering creativity and innovation rose to meet the needs of our resilient audiences and loyal supporters. I am humbled by the tenacity of the Center's leadership team and their ability to persevere through the pandemic, finding new ways to share the magic of puppetry with the world. None of our efforts could be possible without the help of all of our members, donors and sponsors. Your financial support and your passion for our continued vision were crucial factors to our success. Thank you for being part of the magic, and welcome back!

Beth

Our Resolve

On July 1, 2020, the Center's board of directors appointed Beth Schiavo as the Center's new Executive Director. Schiavo served as Interim Managing Director for more than six months before her official appointment as the Center's new leader. Her experience in change management, financial acumen, and community-wide relationships proved critical in helping the Center move forward during the uncertainty of the COVID pandemic.

After spending spring of 2020 reaching over 200,000 households in 88 countries with its Center@Home programming, the Center launched the Digital Summer Series shortly before the beginning of the fiscal year. Digital Guest Artist-in-Residence, David Stephens from All Hands Productions, along with the Center staff, produced and performed an entire line-up of digital programming including puppet shows, interactive workshops, and livestreaming events. The Center also made titles from its performance archive available for rent and its Create-A-Puppet Workshops™ kits available on Etsy.

The collaborative spirit at the Center reflected the overall reaction to COVID by the arts community at large. Arts organizations came together at all levels to support one another and share best practices to engage and support our community in safe ways during an unprecedented time. The summer of Black Lives Matter also prompted important and action-oriented town hall forums to address the state of the BIPOC artist community in Atlanta. The Center had representatives at all of the arts organization meetings as well as the BIPOC town halls.

On July 10th, with public safety health protocols in place, the Center reopened its museum.



Our Response

In April 2020, the Center received a Paycheck Protection Program (PPP) loan of \$462,700. This funding helped the Center retain core employees while the theaters and museum were forced to close to the public and then allowed for the return of additional staff when the Center reopened with limited on-site programming. The Center received full forgiveness of its first PPP loan in December 2020, and recognized the income in the 2020-2021 fiscal year. In April 2021, the Center received a second PPP loan of \$442,625, to assist in funding staffing costs as the Center's attendance and programming grew in 2021. The Center has applied for full forgiveness of the second PPP loan, and anticipates it will recognize that income in the 2021-2022 fiscal year.

As COVID continued, the Center brought in visiting artists as well as guest 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.



In June 2020, David Stephens, Guest Artist-in-Residency, began performing live for digital audiences around the world in productions such as *The Adventures of the Gingerbread Man* and *Billy Goats Gruff and Other Stuff*. After seeing the way audiences responded to this at-home programming, the Center asked Stephens to stay on for the remainder of the summer and present virtual performances of *The Reluctant Dragon*, *The Pied Piper* and *Jack and the Beanstalk*.

After giving us in-kind support in March 2020 by funding the Digital Learning department's Zoom account upgrade (enabling us to increase our connections from 100 to 1,000 for a full year), WarnerMedia awarded us \$25,000 in June 2020 to support our Digital Learning programming in FY20-21. With COVID putting educational digital content in high demand, this funding enabled our Digital Learning team to meet the needs of local, national and global audiences, reaching 15,814 in FY20-21.

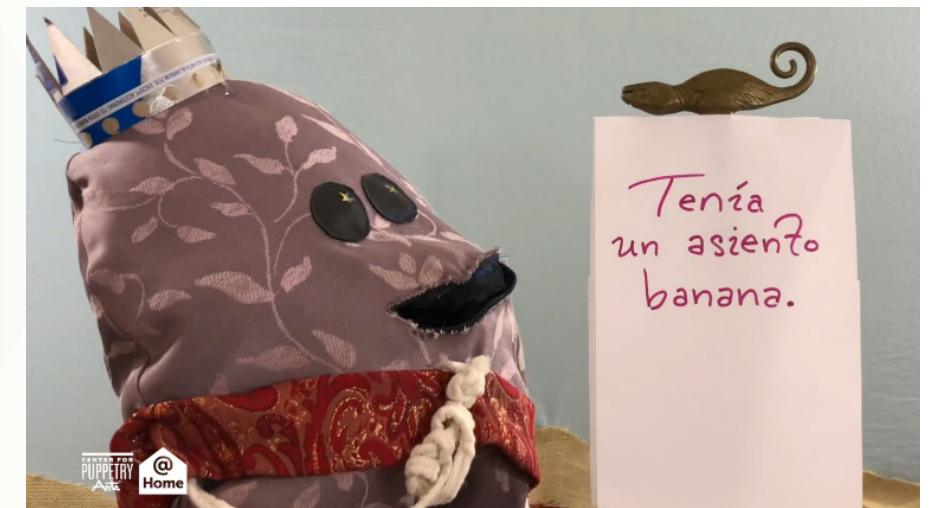
The Center's paid online programming continued to build momentum with *Stories of Color*, *Jim Henson Trivia* and *Make It! Workshops*, providing audiences much needed entertainment at home over Zoom.



Hendrickson, puppet designer/builder, Rollie Krewson, and electrical-mechanical effects and prop designer, Larry Jameson. *Emmet Otter's Jug Band Christmas in July* turned out to be the Center's most well attended virtual event ever. Proceeds from the event helped support the preservation of the Center's Jim Henson Collection, which includes over 500 puppets, props and costumes.

In honor of Hispanic Heritage Month, the Center presented *El Rey Pasa*, a daily celebration of kindness, inspiration, and enthusiasm featuring the original Center-created character of King Raisin. Entirely in Spanish, *El Rey Pasa* aired on Facebook in September and October and encouraged participants to submit their own puppet shows in Spanish.

To celebrate Halloween, The Center presented *The Ghastly Dreadfuls ExZoom'd from the Tomb*, a special virtual variety show for adult fans of the Center's iconic macabre production. The Halloween fun included rare video clips from the vault, jokes to scare the yell out of you, a virtual





memorable puppets used in the performance.

After losing over 50% of funding due to COVID, the Center was experiencing financial difficulty, but the response from the community during the pandemic was uplifting.

In November 2020, the Center launched the Give a Hand campaign in preparation for Giving Tuesday. Thanks to a generous matching gift in memoriam of Martha 'Mot' Dinos, a long time board member and supporter of the Center, donations were matched up to \$50,000. Funding raised by the community helped support general operating costs lost during the pandemic. And thankfully, during that time of uncertainty, two fundamental truths gave us hope - together we can do extraordinary things and from crisis comes innovation, creativity and inspiration - all key components of the Center's mission.



installing a new HVAC unit and giving the theater a fresh coat of paint. To provide a more unified and elevated patron experience, \$10,000 was utilized to make aesthetic improvements that in and outside the building that correspond with the design aesthetics adopted in the Center's 2015 expansion. An additional \$168,000 was invested in new Digital Learning equipment, seed funding for a new production for our Mainstage

costume parade, festive cocktail/mocktail recipes and behind-the-scenes exclusives from the Ghastlies themselves. Patrons were also invited to the special in-person exhibition, *A Gathering of Ghastlies: Puppets from The Ghastly Dreadfuls*, for an up-close look at some of the most



Theater, and seed funding for a new annual Puppetry Now series of special exhibits highlighting contemporary artists in the BIPOC community. The remaining \$77,000 was granted towards sales and marketing operations including a new Communications Manager and providing the Marketing and Accounting personnel with additional user licenses and in-depth training in Tessitura programs.

In December 2020, the Center also received a \$140,000 gift from the David, Helen and Marian Woodward Fund, which was used to update storage servers and computer stations. The funding went towards updating storage servers and computer stations. New servers were installed in the first half of 2021, providing the Center with more storage space in a faster and more reliable system. New workstations started rolling out to employees in the beginning of 2021, but much of the equipment did not arrive or get installed until FY21-22.

In February 2021, the Center presented "Spotlight: A Conversation with Black Theater Artists". This dynamic panel highlighted influential artists who play or have played critical roles at the Center for Puppetry Arts to help young people envision a future in the arts. Throughout the discussion, panelists spoke on how being an African American has influenced or impacted their careers. Following the panel, speakers held a Q&A session with the audience. Hosted by Brian Harrison, panelists included Jared Brodie, Raymond Carr, Jimmica Collins, Greg Hunter and S. Renee Clark.



Center for Puppetry Arts Gala Co-chairs Sydney Langford and Gigi Rouland were planning a spring fundraising event when COVID hit. They pivoted fast, and with board members Debbie Ellis, Judy Garland, Cheryl Henson, Susan Langford and Catherine Kraft Love, they produced a virtual online auction. After the three-day bidding window had concluded on May 6, 1,300 participants—people from all 50 states, Canada, the United Kingdom, France, the Netherlands, Argentina, and Australia—had raised nearly \$170,000 for the Center.

Our Return

In September of 2020, long-time puppeteer and friend of the Center, Lee “That Puppet Guy” Bryan, brought back live, in-person performances with Puppet Pop-Ups in the Center’s Atrium. These 10-minute puppet performances highlighted a variety of shows from his repertoire and allowed Museum visitors to experience live, in-person puppetry again for the first time since the start of the pandemic. Puppet performances included *How Little Frog Tricked the Lion*, *The Lion and the Mouse*, *Dr. Dinosaur* and *The Giant*, *the Beanstalk and Jack*.



As Halloween approached, the Center planned to celebrate the fall festivities in new ways. With traditional trick-or-treating unavailable to children, the first Monster Mash event let families enjoy spooky storytelling from *The Good Witch Aretta*, *Create-A-Puppet Workshops™*, entry to the *Worlds of Puppetry Museum*, walk-around puppeteers, and leave with a bag of candy to enjoy at home.

In November of 2020, the Center for Puppetry Arts was fortunate enough to be identified by a generous benefactor as the appropriate place to publicly interpret and exhibit two puppets, a young Rudolph and Santa, from the 1964 Rankin/Bass stop motion television special *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*. The puppets are now on long-term loan to the Center after their recent sale at auction. Fans of the television special have followed these puppets on their journey from the attic of Barbara Adams, an employee of Rankin/Bass in the 1970s, to *Antiques Roadshow* in 2005. After their feature on the show, Screen Novelties restored the puppets in 2006, as they were in rough condition from heat and regular use as Christmas decorations for the Adams family. The Center featured them on exhibition in 2006 and the pair were sold to numerous collectors before finally ending up at auction once again in November 2020.



While the Rankin/Bass puppets were having some conservation work done, the Center’s museum was inspired to present *Very Merry Puppetry: Puppets of Holidays Past, Present, and Future*. Featuring puppets from the Center’s production of *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer™*, *Emmet Otter’s Jug-Band Christmas*, *Sabrina*

the Teenage Witch, and more, this special exhibition of holiday puppets from the museum’s collection helped the Center launch its *Very Merry Holiday Celebration*, marking the return to the Mainstage Theater with *Stan the Lovesick Snowman*. Husband and wife puppeteer-duo Tim and Amy Sweeney portrayed 13 characters in the production adapted and directed by the Center’s Artistic Director Jon Ludwig. In this adaptation of the fairy tale by Christian Andersen, audiences visited the dreamy snow-laden countryside complete with snowflakes, icicles and cold starry nights without ever having to leave the relatively mild Georgia winter.



After consulting with The Atlanta Opera in October for their production of *Pagliacci*, the Center continued the partnership in April 2021 for their production of *The Threepenny Opera*. Center Artistic Director Jon Ludwig and a talented team of puppet builders and designers led by Jason Hines created more than 30 puppets for the adult production.

As in-person events opened back up, the Center opened its Spring Series in April 2021 with *Billy Goats Gruff and Other Stuff*, a blend of several fractured fairy tale favorites performed

by the award-winning All Hands Productions. *The Reluctant Dragon* then took the stage in an adaptation of the Kenneth Grahame classic about the value of friendship. On April 30, Little Red and the Big Bad Wolf worked double-time in a twisted, tangle of tales in *The Big Bad Little Red Pig Show*, by Lee “That Puppet Guy” Bryan. Then, also by Bryan, upcycled thrift store finds got new life in the unique retelling of the most classic puppet tale, *Pinocchio*. This solo “tour de farce” combined prop comedy, found object puppetry and original sound compositions in a laugh out loud experience perfect for the whole family.



In June 2021, the Center was thrilled to present a new special exhibition in the Dean DuBose Smith Gallery, *Masterpiece of Puppetry: Jim Henson’s The Dark Crystal: Age of Resistance*. Puppets, props and costumes from the 2019 Netflix series, based on the original 1982 film, gave audiences a look behind the scenes at how the series was made. *Dark Crystal* fans from all over the world came to view the exhibition in person. For fans who couldn’t come visit the exhibition in person, the Center hosted a virtual event titled *Jim Henson’s The Dark Crystal: Age of Resistance—A Reunion of Puppeteers*. Puppeteers from the Emmy Award-winning epic production discussed the making of the series through first-hand accounts. In this intimate conversation, audiences learned what it was like to be part of the groundbreaking, landmark production and was followed by a Q&A session with attendees. Participants included Warrick Brownlow-Pike, David Chapman, Helena Clark-Smee, Kevin Clash, Alice Dinnean, Louise Gold, Beccy Henderson, Neil Sterenberg, Oliver Taylor and Victor Yerrid.

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