

CENTER FOR
PUPPETRY
Arts[®]

2021–2022

Annual Report



Normal is Relative



In a traditional office setting, **“normal”** includes attending meetings, reviewing spreadsheets, reading emails, chatting with colleagues around the coffee pot, and fretting over why the printer isn’t working properly. But at the Center, “normal” is a bit different. Sure, all of that happens here as well, but our “normal” includes carving blocks of foam, weaving around busloads of children, traversing marionette bridges, and having serious conversations with puppets. I embraced the Center’s “unique normal” when I signed on in 2019, and I’m pleased to say that for our 43rd season, we were able to return to our normal by offering a full slate of educational, entertaining, heartwarming, and thought-provoking programming.

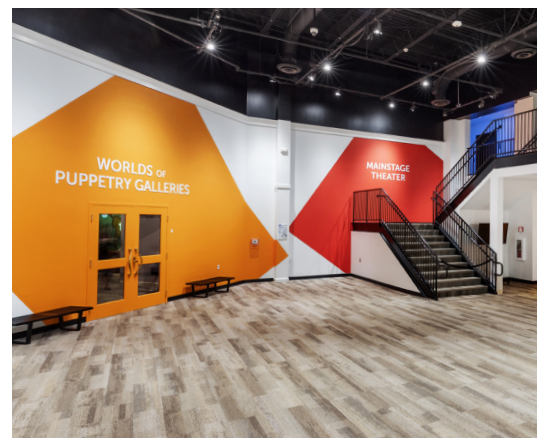
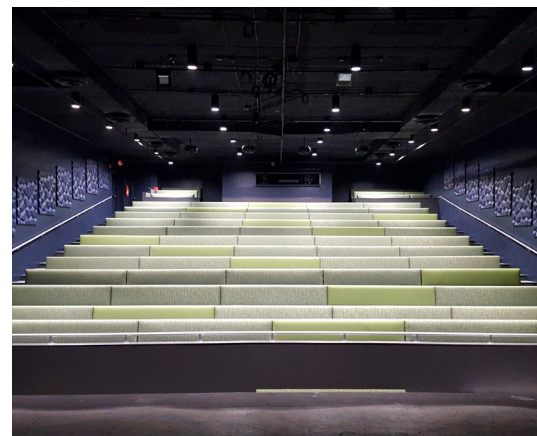
With the generous support of our grantors and donors, the Center was able to share the magic of puppetry with nearly **125,000 on-site and virtual patrons**. This included offering self-guided tours of the Museum’s two permanent collections galleries and three special exhibitions, fifteen live, fully-staged theatrical puppetry productions (including *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*, *Pete the Cat*, *The Ghastly Dreadfuls*, and *XPT!*), digital pay-per-view screenings of archival puppetry performances, and over **1,000 hours** of interactive and virtual on-site educational workshops that promoted creativity and imagination for patrons of all ages and skill levels.

Even still, COVID remained a concern. While vaccination rates at the beginning of the fiscal year were increasing among the general population, our youngest audience members were still at risk. With that information, we initially limited Family Series ticket sales to allow for social distancing between parties as well as required patrons to wear masks and sanitized the theater between performances with electrostatic sprayers. This combination of measures enabled patrons to feel safe as they enjoyed Family Series performances in the summer and early fall. By November 2021, the vaccine was approved for children ages 5-11, and as vaccination rates continued to increase, the restrictions on patrons were lifted. However, Center staff continued to sanitize the theater between performances, and patrons—especially those with younger children—were encouraged to continue to wear masks throughout the year if it

made them more comfortable. As a result, we saw onsite attendance figures largely return to pre-pandemic levels even as Center staff continued to build partnerships with organizations in the community, including The King Center, the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra, Children’s Healthcare of Atlanta, Fulton County’s Central Library, Project Chimp, NextGen Men & Women, and Norfolk Southern.

But even as our programming and audiences returned to “normal,” we weren’t quite satisfied. The downtime during the pandemic allowed us to look at our empty, aging, campus and dream big. Along with the support of three donors who share our vision, our staff spent much of the year bringing those dreams to fruition:

- In September 2021, our staff and contractors completed a ten-month-long refresh of the Mainstage Theater—the oldest and largest of the organization’s two performance venues—made possible by a generous grant from the Lettie Pate Evans Foundation. After repairing the risers, cleaning and upgrading the HVAC system, and upgrading the visual aesthetics with new cushions and upholstery, paint, handrails, carpeting, acoustic tiles, and navigational and house lights, we can now provide patrons with a more enjoyable theatrical experience in a space that’s easier to clean and sanitize.
- Just a few months later, a grant from the Love Family Foundation enabled us to hire a professional design team to help us refurbish the lobby, atrium, hallways, and other public spaces. The design team helped us embrace our quirkiness with vibrant paint schemes and improve our directional and wayfinding signs to make it easier for patrons to navigate around the building. By the end of the year, staff and patrons alike were celebrating the whimsical and joyous atmosphere radiating throughout the campus.
- Simultaneously, an anonymous individual donor helped us purchase items from the staff’s Wish List for the Center. These purchases—ranging from new computer hardware and software to new video conferencing systems, and from tools and equipment needed to build sets and museum exhibits to contracting with Tools for Life, a subsidiary of Georgia Tech, to help us improve our programming accessibility for people with disabilities—may not have been as obvious as the new paint and upholstery, but they were just as crucial to helping us achieve our dream of elevating the patron experience.



Normal is relative, and by hiring employees, attracting supporters, and welcoming patrons from our diverse communities to share in the magic of puppetry, the Center has become a sanctuary for those that don’t always think of themselves as “normal.” COVID was a challenge, but we’re incredibly grateful for all of your support in helping us once again find our “normal” in the post-COVID world.

A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Beth". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a long horizontal stroke at the end.

Beth Schiavo
Executive Director

Museum


In addition to welcoming over **70,000** visitors into the Worlds of Puppetry Museum's two permanent exhibition galleries, the Center offered a variety of pop-up and special exhibitions and programming throughout the 2021-2022 season.

We began the year showcasing the special exhibit Masterpiece of Puppetry: *The Dark Crystal: Age of Resistance*, which explored how The Jim Henson Company continued the founder's legacy of revolutionizing the art of puppetry with Netflix's *The Dark Crystal: Age of Resistance*. In conjunction with this exhibit, the Museum hosted a virtual panel discussion with six of The Jim Henson Company's artists involved in the creation of *The Dark Crystal: Age of Resistance*.

For the holiday season, we explored the history of *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* through early licensed objects such as a first edition of the Montgomery Ward illustrated publication and two remaining stop motion puppets from the 1964 Rankin/Bass *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* television special. To celebrate the exhibit, museum members and major donors were invited to attend an after-hours celebration featuring holiday treats, a sing-along with Dolph Amick (the voice of Sam the Snowman in the Center's fully-staged theatrical production of *Rudolph*), and the opportunity to meet Santa himself ("Santa" Rick Rosenthal of Atlanta).

This year's pop-up exhibitions featured the Atlanta Braves mascot Homer highlighting the art of body puppetry, puppets created by The Jim Henson Company for PBS's *It's a Big Big World*, and over a dozen lantern puppets created by Chantel Rytter, the artist and creator of the Atlanta Beltline Parade. In addition to celebrating her as a local puppet-maker and contemporary artist, we featured Rytter in October—when patrons to our annual adult-oriented, cabaret-style puppet production *The Ghastly Dreadfuls* were filling the Center nightly—to remind adults that the ancient art of puppetry remains relevant in our modern world and is not just for the kids!

The museum ended the year by welcoming over **150 attendees** to an opening reception for the exhibition showcasing the work of Tarish "Jeghetto" Pipkins, a ground-breaking solo puppetry artist. Made from wood, PVC pipe, cardboard, and other salvaged and recycled materials, Jeghetto's interactive exhibition allowed visitors to manipulate four afro-futuristic puppets set in post-apocalyptic backdrops. Jeghetto's special exhibition was the first in the museum's Puppetry NOW series, which empowers contemporary artists of color to experiment and exhibit their creations with Center visitors and audiences. The opening reception included an artist-talkback session with Jeghetto which was moderated by Christopher Daniel, a journalist and adjunct professor at Morehouse College.

HOMER THE BRAVE AT TURNER FIELD

Homer, a simple headpiece-style character, was introduced as the new mascot for the Atlanta Braves in 1989, after the team retired the Chief Noc-A-Homa.

DECEMBER 4, 2014
Courtesy Atlanta Braves



Theater

In our first full theatrical season in the post-COVID era, we offered over **400 performances**—**391 Family Series** and **23 New Directions Series** for Adults and Teens (NDS)—across fifteen fully-staged theatrical productions.

The fiscal year began the Center's Theater for the Very Young productions of *The Ugly Duckling* and *Mother Goose*, which are both designed to be interactive, educational, and entertaining for children ages 2 and up. These were followed by guest performances from Frogtown Mountain Puppeteers, offering two weeks of *Everybody Loves Pirates* and then two weeks of *The Headless Horseman of Steepy Silly Hollow*. Meanwhile, over **1,500 vaccinated adult audience members** joined us to celebrate the return of *The Ghastly Dreadfuls*—a staple of the New Directions Series.

November marked the return of Rudolph to the Center's stage! With **75 performances, 16,371 patrons** marked the holiday season with a performance of *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*. Even though we had to cancel the final week of performances because a member of the cast contracted COVID, we still exceeded our audience and revenue goals for the production.

In January, the Family Series presented Mesner Puppet Theater's *The Snowy Day and Other Stories* by Ezra Jack Keats before remounting the Center's adaptation of *Click Clack Moo: Cows that Type* in February and early March. Meanwhile, because vaccination rates among school-aged children were increasing, our ticketing team began hearing from teachers—mostly from private schools and smaller public school districts—that they wanted to book field trips to the Center. This cautious progression brought in modest ticket sales during a traditionally slow time in our season before accelerating as winter gave way to spring.

For the final two weeks of March, audiences enjoyed Frisch Marionettes' jazz-inspired adaptation of *The Wizard of Oz*, allowing Center staff to remount our adaptation of the popular *Pete the Cat* book series in April and May. While some of the larger districts remained hesitant, smaller school groups joined us in the Mainstage Theater, helping us share *Pete the Cat* with **13,652 audience members**. We rounded out our Family Series season by presenting Axis Theatre's *Somebody Loves You, Mr. Hatch* and opening the Center's *The Little Pirate Mermaid*, which adds a swashbuckling twist to Hans Christian Anderson's classic tale.

Meanwhile, the New Directions Series went into high gear in the spring as part of our investment in contemporary artists and their innovative work targeted to more mature audiences. At the beginning of April, adult and teen audiences joined us for three poignant performances of Nick Lehane's *Chimpanzee*, a non-verbal production that delves into the ethics of using animals for biomedical testing, and in May the collaborative creative processes that began in 2019 finally came to fruition as *Xperimental Puppetry Theater (XPT)* returned to our stage for the first time post-COVID. Finally, in addition to inviting Tarish "Jeghetto" Pipkins to take over our special exhibitions gallery for Puppetry NOW, the Center closed out our production year with performances of Pipkins' *5P1NOK10* (pronounced "Spinokio")—an afro-futuristic take on the classic Pinocchio tale. In addition to receiving rave reviews from audience members, we're pleased that Jeghetto's *5P1NOK10* and Puppetry NOW exhibition were featured in articles published by The Atlanta Journal-Constitution, WABE, and Rolling Out, among others.



Education and Digital Learning

In conjunction with the full theatrical season, we were excited to once again offer over **1,000 hours** of our signature education initiative, the Create-A-Puppet Workshop™, but that barely scratches the surface of everything that our Education team did in 2021-2022!

In addition to conducting those Create-A-Puppet Workshops™, our Teaching Artists presented **36 private lessons** covering a range of puppetry topics (from design and build to show creation to performance), in-person and virtual, with and for students ranging in age from 14 to 75 from all over the U.S. Throughout the year, nearly **4,200 children** and adults engaged with our educational Outreach programming. One example includes Jeff Domke, Associate Education Director, leading a special week-long residency at Arbor Station Elementary (Douglasville, GA). Over the week, Jeff immersed himself in the 3rd-grade classrooms and provided hands-on help as the students designed and built their very own puppets and created their own puppet shows.

Meanwhile, staff presented special workshops to over **3,600 students** of all ages and ability levels. In April and May 2022, we were able to partner with Cobb County Schools to share the magical connections between puppetry and classroom learning with over 650 students. We're especially pleased that Aretta Baumgartner, Education Director, was able to share her infectious love of puppetry with over **2,750 theatre students** and teachers across the U.S. and Canada as she taught or presented keynote speeches at Educational Theatre Association Thespian Festivals (virtual and/or person) in Alabama, Arkansas, Canada, Florida, Georgia, Kansas, Nevada, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Virginia, and Washington.

Meanwhile, our Digital Learning program continued to reach audiences all across the nation and globe, sharing workshops and puppetry performances with nearly **24,000 audience members** via Zoom. This included partnering with local organizations like the City Schools of Decatur and Fifth Third Bank as well as organizations in Cleveland, OH, and Wichita, KS to provide live, interactive, educational puppetry programming to summer school students. Digital Learning was also excited to partner with the Ryan Seacrest Studio at Children's Healthcare of Atlanta to provide free digital programming to CHOA's "room-bound" patients. As a result of all of their efforts, the Digital Learning program received another of the Center for Interactive Learning and Collaboration's (CILC) Pinnacle Awards celebrating our important work.



Working With and Out in the Community

While the pandemic forced the Center to pause its audience accessibility initiative (along with all of the Center's other onsite programming) during our greatly reduced, mostly virtual 2020-2021 season, this year we resumed our efforts to serve people with sensory processing difficulties such as Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) and their families. Staff across the Center provided modifications to everything from lighting and sound levels to Create-a-Puppet Workshop™ construction materials to ensure the year's four Sensory-Friendly Sundays would create a welcoming, comfortable, and judgment-free environment for all.

Out in the community, the Center's artistic team won **First Place** in the Business Division of the Atlanta Botanical Garden's Scarecrow in the Gardens Event, staff continued our holiday tradition of helping Children's Healthcare of Atlanta celebrate the holidays with their Season on the Square and CHOA Smiles of the Season Breakfast events, and Jimmica Collins, our Associate Producer, partnered with The King Center to offer a puppet-enhanced virtual book reading event as part of their celebration of Martin Luther King, Jr. Day. Then on March 6, our Education staff partnered with the Atlanta Symphony Orchestra to offer pre-concert puppet-building activities in celebration of the ASO's **first in-person concert** since the onset of COVID-19. Damon Young, Lead Teaching Artist, worked with ASO volunteers to guide children as they created puppets inspired by *Peter and the Wolf* and other music featured in the performance. Aretta Baumgartner, Education Director, also performed in the concert alongside Cincinnati-based Madcap Puppets as they staged *Peter and the Wolf* with large-scale puppets choreographed and scripted in support of the live music. We love our partnerships with other Atlanta cultural institutions!

We were also pleased to join in a partnership with Project Chimp—an animal sanctuary located in Blue Ridge, GA—to drive home the poignancy of Nick Lehane's *Chimpanzee*. A Project Chimp representative joined us for each of the three performances and shared with attendees how similar chimps are to humans. Additionally, the artists were able to visit the animal sanctuary, and they joined the Project Chimp representative for an audience talk-back panel after the final performance.

Finally, in addition to offering our regular programming, staff continued to provide personalized programming for patrons with special interests in puppetry, such as in June 2022, when Jeff Domke, Associate Education Director, met with Sam (age 11) and his mother, Allison. A month prior, Allison had reached out to the Center in an email saying "[Sam] has Aspergers and [puppetry] is his major interest; he spends all of his free time on puppet making, and our house is fairly taken over by puppets! I wanted to know if we could find a way to allow Sam to display his creations, or have some sort of involvement in a program there." Domke was excited to give Sam and Allison a behind-the-scenes tour of the Center that included meeting with Jason Hines (Resident Puppet Builder) and Carole D'Agostino (Puppet Shop Manager) to discuss Sam's creations.



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We could not exist without your generous support!

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