

I stood in my studio attic, contemplating a mysterious assortment of ancient trunks and luggage. The trunks before me were the remnants of an unknown puppeteer's career. What an odd assemblage it was. Not one piece matched another and none was newer than forty years old.

I am not a puppet collector. These trunks just found their way to me. It was with great relief to the previous owners, the State Theater of North Carolina, that I would receive them.

Each trunk had travel decals recalling journeys of long ago. I decided to open the cases one by one, to savor each find and try to unlock its secrets. I sensed these boxes held a mystery. They were a time capsule. I was told only that they held marionettes and that they were very old.

So with some anticipation, I popped the latch of one of the trunks. I was greeted with that particular smell one whiffs when sorting boxes from the attic. Within I beheld the miserable sight of a bunch of tennis balls strung together to form a person.

I groaned.

Had I volunteered to clog up my studio with a bunch of junk, as if I was a halfway house to the dump? I had some hopes that there would be something interesting inside, but it was the work of an amateur. I pulled out a box of photos and clippings and set them aside.

Then I saw something that was recognizable at once. The bagged marionettes lay side by side in the trunk.

Opening the first marionette bag, I discovered a commercial doll that had been converted into a marionette. I opened another and found a group of the same type of doll strung together on one control forming a can-can line. In another I found a similar contrivance in the form of a boys choir, but all of poor quality. On I delved through trunks, finding a snowman, a Santa Claus, a really tacky reindeer, a doll made into a violin player and then a Liberace marionette complete with piano, but again the work of an enthusiast.

But then I came upon something amazing. It was a "Carmen Miranda" marionette of the utmost quality – unlike any of the others. The face was beautifully sculpted and its painting was luminous. Her shapely legs were

incredibly articulated, ending in tiny high heels. One thing seemed certain. The person who made this marionette could not have been the same person who had made the others.

and performed at luncheons, libraries and birthday parties in and around Boca Raton, Florida.

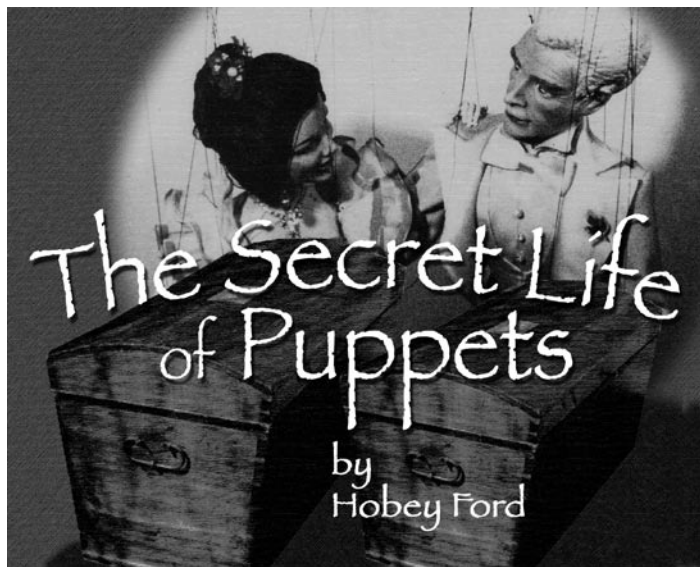
But there was something else I was looking for. Then I found it. At eighteen years old Jesse had apprenticed to her cousin Sue Hastings, the renowned puppet matron who, in the 1930s, was running the biggest US touring puppet company of her time or since.

Sue Hastings lived and worked in New York City and as a young woman was a student of Tony Sarg, the father of American puppetry. His other protégés included Rufus and Margo Rose, and Bil Baird. Sue Hastings took a marionette class from Sarg, and then became his biggest competitor.

Jesse Morhman, born Jesse Morrow, was a Philadelphia native. At the age of eighteen, Jesse visited her cousin Sue Hastings' studios in the early thirties and became

enamored with the world of marionettes. To her family's dismay she went off to New York City to join her famous cousin's marionette theater, which must have seemed to her parents just short of running away with the circus.

Jesse worked, assembling and painting puppet parts. She soon learned to manipulate the puppets and before long became trainer to new performers for the troupe. She stayed for eight years, which culminated in a two-year run at the 1939-40 World's Fair in New York City. Tony Sarg performed at the Fair as well. As the Fair wound down, World War II was getting underway, bringing an end



Setting aside the marionette, I turned to some clippings and photographs. As I pored over the press releases I was introduced to the previous owner of these marionettes.

Her name was Jesse Mohrman. She had taken up puppetry after retirement, inspired by an earlier interest in puppetry. She had a professional puppet theater



Carmen Miranda. Photo by Gary Fields, 1989. (Carmen and blonde man in the header photo, above, shot by Harry Reid, NYC)



Jesse Mohrman as a young woman working in her aunt's studio.



This line-up of marionettes are part of the cast that appeared in the NY World's Fair show in 1939. An Edgar Bergen puppet appears next to Charlie McCarthy. Right of Charlie, in the white suit, is Rudy Valee.

to Sarg's theater, followed soon after by Hastings' retirement.

The company continued to perform sporadically under various protégés of Sue. Jesse went on to work at the Metropolitan Museum of Art in NYC as head of personal. She would occasionally create shows for the families of the museum employees. It was after her retirement in the mid '70s that she revived her interest in puppetry in earnest.

Turning back to the Carmen Miranda puppet, I was becoming surer that she was a Hastings creation, though Jesse was quoted as saying she had built all of her puppets. It also occurred to me that Jesse had acquired many puppet parts from the Hastings collection, but had created new heads – the heads were definitely of a lesser quality than Hastings'. A Jimmy Carter portrait puppet attested to this fact. The face had little resemblance to Carter. I only gleaned his identity from a press release, which also pointed to the identity of a young Amy Carter marionette that played the violin. I pulled out a black disco dancer in gold lame; then a cheerleader character – this one was nice as well. There were all told about a couple dozen complete marionettes, along with a box of memorabilia.

On a trip to Dallas, I visited Gary Busk who, besides having a world-class puppet collection, has an encyclopedic knowledge of puppets and their makers. Gary looked at photos of the Carmen Miranda marionette, and decided that, indeed, it was a Hastings figure, but probably not originally made as a Carmen Miranda. He directed me to visit Kathy Burks who lives in the Dallas area as well. Kathy had purchased nearly half the existing Hastings marionettes in the seventies from a surviving member of the Hastings Company. Kathy had many photos from the Hastings Company as

well, yet all her photos were different than the ones I had received. Kathy and Gary pointed me to Dorlis Grubidge's book on Sue Hastings that had been published by Luman Coad's Charlemagne Press.

Now I felt I had solved whatever mystery there was within the trunks.

A few years went by and the pile of Jesse's puppets began to get in my way.

I found that every last puppet had at its core a Hastings marionette or part of one.

One day my puppetry mentor, Clyde Hollifield, came by for a visit. I showed him the Carmen marionette and he liked it so much that I offered him one of Jesse's marionettes to fool around with. They had Hastings controls and parts here and there and I thought he could have some fun with it. I gave him the disco dancer and he was so enthusiastic, that I offered him the Jimmy Carter marionette as well.

Within hours he called me and told me to open Bil Baird's "Art of the Puppet" book to page 229. On doing so I saw a photo of Sue Hastings' "Harlem Dancers." I had unknowingly given him the male dancer. It had been disguised in gold lamme and a glitzy hat. A couple of days later Clyde called again. His friend Michael Whitney had been looking at the Jimmy Carter marionette when he noticed that Jimmy's smile looked lot like the female dancer in the photo. Clyde then recognized the smile and was certain. Taking a knife he found a crack along the lower lip and carefully popped off the plastic wood chin. There was a tiny shapely black chin beneath. Then he continued to carefully pop off other sections of the face till he had revealed



Sue Hastings at home in her NYC Penthouse

the face of the female Harlem dancer. The problem was that the body didn't match. He came over right away and we looked through the trunks. We paused for about two seconds and then began to tear into them in earnest.

There was a beautiful marionette inside the snowman. Beneath Santa Claus' body we found the petite body of the female Harlem dancer, complete with taps on her shoes. It was totally arbitrary that I had given Clyde the male figure and even more arbitrary that I had thrown in the Jimmy Carter figure. Then we began to muse on the coincidence. I dug through the memorabilia and discovered that the Harlem Dancers appeared at the World's Fair performances of 1939-1940.

Methodically I went through the whole collection and pulled off all wigs and costumes that were recent additions. It felt strange disassembling Jesse's work



The Harlem Dancers who appeared in the Sue Hastings performances at the 1939-1940 World's Fair

and yet it seemed the proper thing to do, as Sue Hastings was an historic figure. Jesse's shows must have delighted her audiences; yet her recycled figures paled in contrast to what lay beneath the surface.

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Clyde muses that the dancers had traveled an underground railroad of

puppets who, after 70 years of being hidden in trunks, sold and resold, completely disguised and defaced, had emerged to be reunited on Valentine's Day of Black History Month, the day I had presented them to him.

I conclude that there was "the hand of fate" in all of this, and that there must be a secret life of puppets.

As we began to reassemble and rematch puppet parts to their original states, the time came to restring them. When the puppets arrived the costuming restricted their basic movement. On restringing them without the costumes, the marionettes worked like magic. Each figured revealed its secret idiosyncratic movement and personality.

One morning I decided to pore over all the details one more time to see if I had missed anything. A newspaper clipping told the story of the day Jesse had taken the cheerleader puppet to visit the then elderly Sue Hastings in the hospital. This puppet was original, but recostumed. Jesse let the cheerleader marionette dance on Sue's bed. Sue was taken with the little figure and was quoted saying "she's perfect." Sue died the next day.

I then discovered the true identity of the "Carmen Miranda" figure. She had also performed at the World's Fair but as "Ginger Rogers". Then a date popped out at me. It caught my attention because it was the day's date, May 10th – Sue Hastings Birthday!

Clyde remarked that the whole experience was like that of opening a fine old bottle of wine. To me it was like puppet archeology. The remaining figures hang in my studio and if I pause

Where do old puppets go to retire? There are several collections in the US: The Detroit Institute of the Arts, The Center for Puppetry Arts in Atlanta, Alan Cook's POG collection in Pasadena, The Baird collection in Mason City Iowa, Fred Rogers collection at the Pittsburg Children's Museum, Frank Ballard's collection at UCONN and the private collections of John Miller, Doug Preis, and Gary Busk. There are certainly other fine collections as well. The life of old puppets is full of peril and mishap and many dramas have unfolded as these silent figures pass on beyond the lives of their makers. These collections form an important legacy for future puppeteers to study and learn from.

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for a moment to muse over them I become captivated by their mystery. Clyde restored the Harlem Dancers and they are teaching him their old routine. I am hesitant to re-costume the marionettes I kept. I am more intrigued at their inner workings anyway.

I have been carving marionettes lately. Who knows who will find them someday in a dusty trunk? Perhaps they will reveal their secrets.

Hobey Ford is a professional puppeteer living in Weaverville, North Carolina. His company is Golden Rod Puppets.

You can learn more from "Sue Hastings - A Puppet Showwoman" by Dorlis Grubidge, published in 1989 by Charlemagne Press, c/o Luman Coad, North Vancouver, B.C.