World on A String: All About Hazelle’s Marionettes

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Some things come with strings attached. At the Puppetry Arts Institute of Independence, Missouri, that’s a good thing. The PAI is home to the Hazelle Rollins Puppet Museum, housing the masterful marionettes created by the premier puppet-maker of the mid-twentieth century.

For baby boomers, each Christmas often meant a new Hazelle marionette under the tree. Others will certainly recall Bill Bain’s marionette squad romping through “The Lonely Goatherd” in The Sound of Music. But at PAI you’re in for an eye-opener. Here, hundreds of colorful, exquisitely detailed marionettes hang from the racks and rafters. There are clowns . . . witches . . . buccaneers, pirates, and glamour girls. Fairy tale favorites include “Alice” (direct from Wonderland) and The Wizard of Oz gang. Representing pop culture: “Blondie & Dagwood,” “Daniel Boone,” and “Batman & Robin.” Each and every one of these mini-masterpieces sprang from the limitless imagination of one person: Hazelle Hedges Rollins.

Hazelle Hedges embarked on the pursuit of puppetry in 1932. A recent graduate of Kansas University with a degree in fine arts, Hazelle was pondering a career in fashion design, until a visit from an 11-year-old neighbor boy. Donald Newlin had just received an Italian-made marionette and was eager to show it off. He also had a request. One marionette was nice—but two would be much nicer. That was a hit. Donald and his brother Dick began putting on shows for local schools, with Hazelle painting the backgrounds, and, of course, coming up with more marionettes as the scripts became more complex. The tiny troupe moved on to paid appearances at birthday parties, toy stores, and special events (a Kansas City auto show hired them for 46 performances.) For Hazelle Hedgess, a career was born. Next up: teaching at every opportunity. Following her 1941 marriage to John “Woody” Rollins, Hazelle was free to focus on the company’s amazing success. What accounts for the company’s amazing success despite the height of the Depression? First off, Hazelle’s Marionettes were something new. As the ads put it, they were “dolls that come to life.” And, they were affordable, as imported marionettes were out of the range of most Depression-strapped budgets. They were also child-size, unlike professional marionettes. An easy-to-use “airplane control stick” handled the movements of legs, arms, head, and (eventually) mouth. Most importantly, Hazelle Hedges was a tireless promoter, willing to make personal appearances and give demonstrations at every opportunity. Following her 1941 marriage to John “Woody” Rollins, Hazelle was free to focus solely on design and promotion, with Woody focusing on engineering and production. (He spearheaded the company’s move to Tenite plastic for puppet heads and body parts, replacing Body parts, replacing)

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