



Step inside a world
where imagination dwells!

BOB BAKER MARIONETTE THEATER

has enchanted families in Los Angeles and beyond with delightful marionette performances since 1963. *Enchanted Strings* captures the visual history of this palace of puppetry from Bob Baker's earliest days to the theater's transformation into a thriving hub of creative culture. You'll meet the remarkable visual artists and craftspeople who worked alongside him, contributing their talents to build the theater, design the shows, and hand-craft over two thousand incredible marionettes. Archival images and ephemera provide a behind-the-scenes look at Bob's amazing work for Walt Disney and iconic Hollywood films. With more than 300 vintage and contemporary photographs, *Enchanted Strings* will delight Bob Baker Marionette Theater fans around the world, and fascinate everyone who is a child at heart!

Enchanted Strings

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Enchanted Strings

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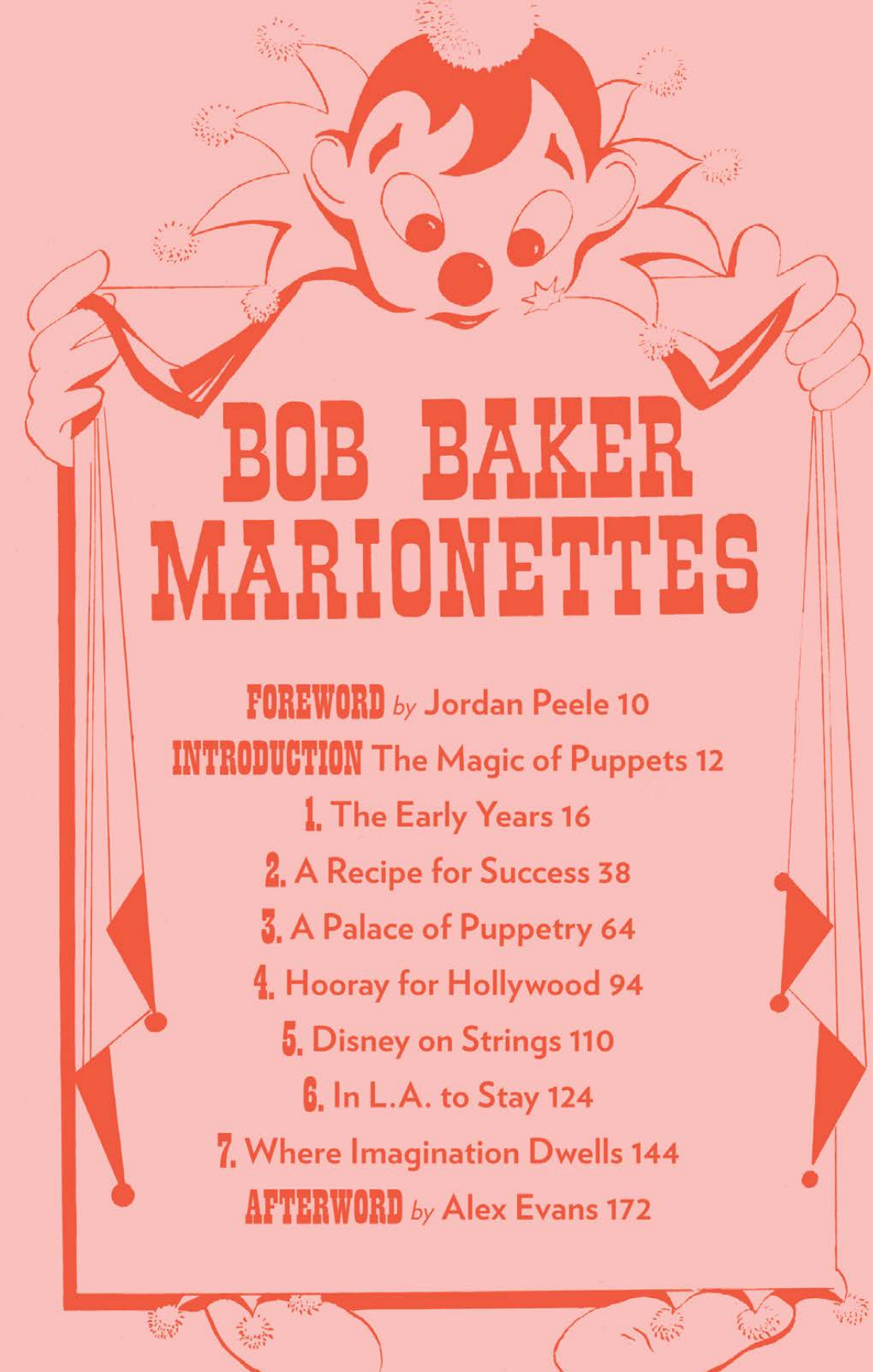
BOB BAKER
MARIONETTE THEATER

Randal J. Metz
FOREWORD BY
Jordan Peele





Bob Baker poses with a waltzer on the stage of the theater's original location in the Echo Park neighborhood near downtown Los Angeles.



BOB BAKER MARIONETTES

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Foreword by Jordan Peele

The lights dim. There's a hush. Crying stops. Phones turn off. Humans dressed like the backdrop take the stage. There's a brief welcome. The lights go out. The music begins. The crowd becomes an audience. And we are rapt.

The objects come out, one act at a time.

There is something that happens to me when I watch great puppetry. A tickle in the back of my spine. Doesn't really matter how grumpy, tired, or distracted I am . . . it doesn't even matter if I haven't had my coffee. In those first moments when the puppeteer fades and the puppet comes alive, I do too. I'm in. I buy it. In fact, I don't just believe, I want to believe. What once was inanimate is now alive, and all my cynical tendencies are forgotten. Traded in, so I can be four again.

There was a period in my life when all I wanted to do was make puppets—not as a hobby but as a livelihood. I went to Sarah Lawrence College for two years with the intended goal of studying this craft and becoming a puppeteer. All because of the wonder that puppetry brings.

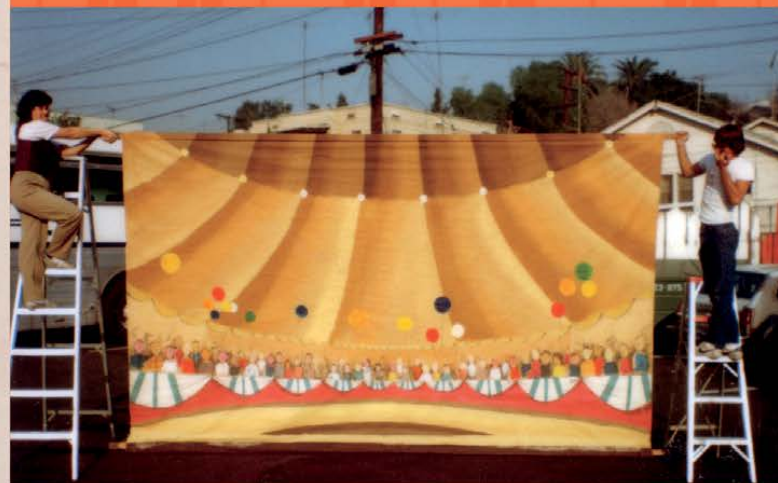
During this time, the most fascinating thing I learned about puppeteering was that the puppets themselves, despite being inanimate, are not innocent bystanders in the craft. They command respect. They take discipline and ingenuity to build them. And a relinquishing of control to operate them. You can build a puppet out of anything, even a dirty sock, but after you craft something you have to listen carefully to it. A good puppeteer has to pay attention to what it wants to be. What type of personality does it have? What does it want to do? Can it sing? Is it funny? Is it mean? If you string a bunch of objects together and hang them from another object, they will hang a certain way because of gravity. And so a puppet isn't so much "operated," it's guided into being.

It's more than the act, the comedy the puppet performs, or the song it sings, it's the soul of the thing itself that has me captivated. The marionette, a noble breed, demands respect of the audience and its puppeteer as well. Defiant and graceful, loose and exact. To witness a presence born of string and gravity is miraculous. The illusion can wander from silly to spooky, sweet to sultry. Doesn't matter. It all seems to resonate on a deeper level. We are our connections.

And once I've bought in, I can't unsee it. And that's what tickles me most. A puppet doesn't become an object again after the show's over. It just goes to sleep. Once it gets life, you can't take it away. It's a reassuring notion.

I've visited the Bob Baker Marionette Theater numerous times, and each time the experience feels completely new. Throughout its history, the theater has amassed an amazing, intricate roster of puppets, deepest I've ever seen. Each one is unique, and alive, and sleeping until the next show. I hope you enjoy exploring this world the Bob Baker artists have created.



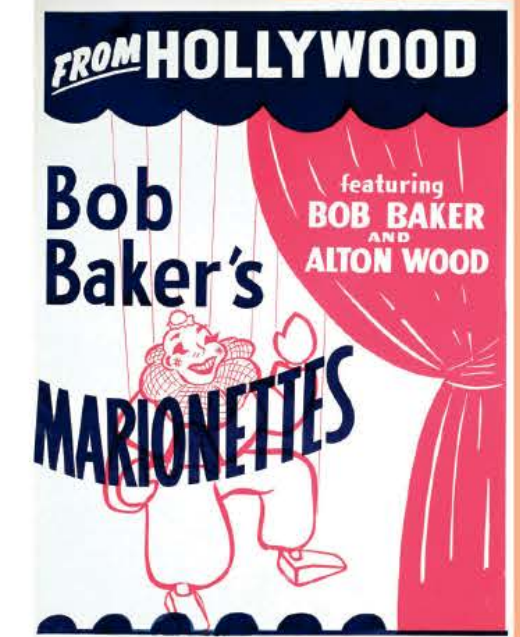


Practical effects—like using an elevated tightrope walker to shift the audience's attention upward to the top of the backdrop—characterized Bob's shows for years to come. Tricks of light, scenery, and engineering elevated the spectacle of marionette puppetry in a way that entertained and mystified audiences of all ages.



with his whole body in sync with his performances. It was Alton who convinced Bob to perform his marionettes “in the round,” with the audience seated on the floor or sitting close to the puppets in a half circle. Alton and Bob performed with their puppets together in many movies, television shows, and commercials.

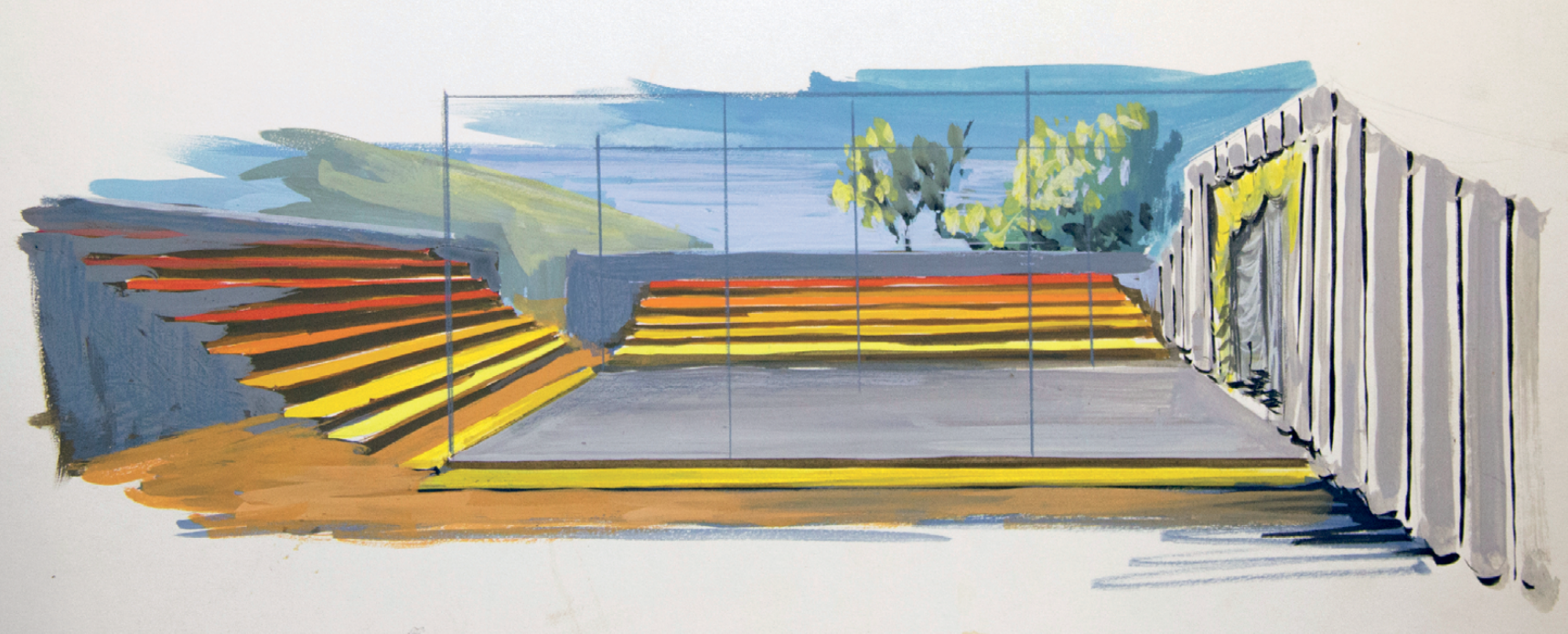
The duo’s marionette shows soon became a mainstay of California county fairs. They traveled to countless schools, festivals, country clubs, and holiday gatherings—wherever they were welcomed. Their traveling road shows included *Over the Garden Wall*, a show featuring forest and garden animals as well as popular nursery rhyme characters, an annual Christmas special such as *Holiday Revue*, a magical journey of all the yearly celebrations, or *The Enchanted Toyshop*, which took viewers on a behind-the-scenes tour of a toy store with magical toys that came to life and entertained. Bob Baker Marionette Productions increased from two puppeteers to three, and eventually employed troupes of five or more. Bob and Alton were developing a personal and professional partnership that led to a lot of success, and together they began looking towards larger venues and higher-quality puppet productions.



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After a fast-track work schedule, the new show, *Get Happy*, opened to rave reviews. *Get Happy* swept theatergoers away to a “happy time somewhere between today and tomorrow and a happy place, wherever that may be,” as the show’s host, a clown named Punchinello, announced. The spectacle began with an opening number featuring three waltzing puppeteers performing in elaborate costumes that doubled as puppet stages, performing hand-puppet versions of the French Harlequin and Columbine characters. The forty-minute production also included humorous opera numbers, a story featuring colorful witches with Dracula and Vampira, elegant waltzing couples, a breathtaking winter scene, and a French street scene with singing mice, rats, and tap-dancing cats. Another popular segment of the new show was called “Pot Au Feu.” Puppeteers Bob and Alton performed numbers with “saucy” marionette vegetables that stole the show. These marionettes were originally built in 1950 for the CBS show *Veggie Fables*. Eventually finding their way into *Get Happy* years later, they also became the show-stoppers of the Bob Baker Marionette Theater production *Something to Crow About*. And at the Laguna festival, everyone was impressed.

The disparate elements in *Get Happy* could easily have made the show seem scattered or disorganized, but Bob’s careful planning and attention to detail combined these characters into an elegant and entertaining variety production that was as rewarding for adults as it was fascinating to children. *Get Happy* was another leap forward in the development of a signature Bob Baker show—in which performances don’t rely on story or narrative, but are bound together through the deft use of color, music, and emotion.

The cohesive concept design produced by James Trittipio for *Get Happy* united every element of the show experience from start to finish. Classical theatre, *Commedia dell’Arte*, and a harlequin motif created a one-of-a-kind visual experience.





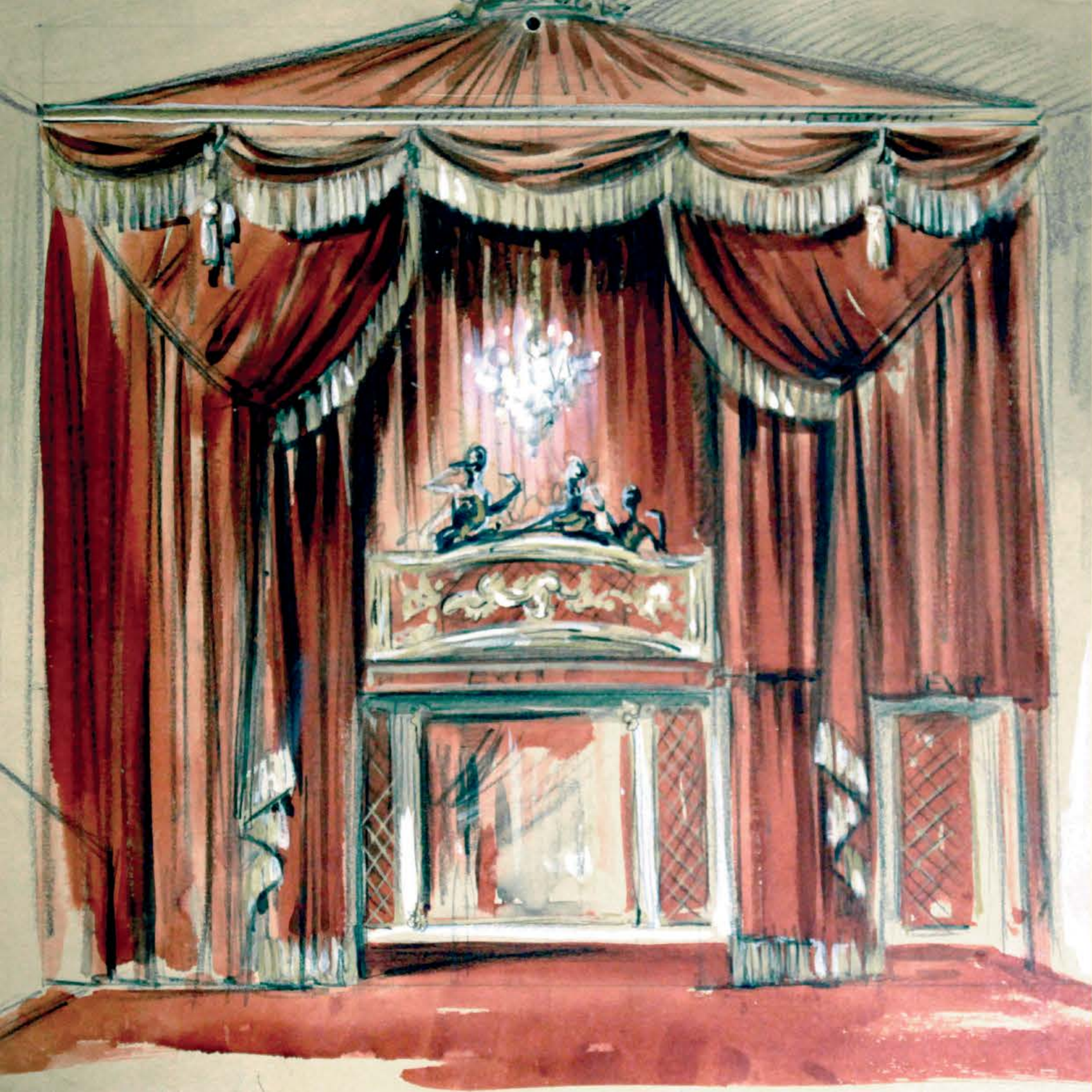
Puppeteers, who had returned to Los Angeles from New York and were preparing to open their famous Turnabout Theatre. But Bob, at seventeen, thought it was more important to enlist in the Army Air Corps. With his parents' permission, he did a brief stint as a warrant officer with the Air Corps Engineers, specializing in the 938th camouflage battalion. His main job was disguising places like the Lockheed base from enemy bombers. Many Hollywood artists were used for this type of work; huge painted canvases of endless fields could easily cover buildings that were used for military purposes, fooling enemy pilots.

Bob was released early from active duty when he became ill with a severe fever while performing his work. During his nine-month recovery period, he worked with patients using puppets as therapy to help resolve problems. He also taught puppet construction and manipulation to patients who needed help with muscle coordination. After leaving the Air Corps, Bob returned home to complete his studies at the University of California, Los Angeles, and then went on to the ArtCenter College of Design.

Bob soon found work in another puppet-related field: stop motion animation. By the end of 1942, he had begun working with renowned film director and stop motion expert George Pal. Born in Hungary, Pal had emigrated to the United States in 1939, bringing with him his style of stop motion called "replacement animation." Utilized to its fullest potential in Pal's famous *Puppetoons* short films (1940–1948), replacement animation required 9,000 individually carved and machined wooden figures or parts for a typical film. For each movement of the puppet, and for every second of film, a new head or limb was used to convey motion.

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A Palace of Puppetry

Bob's experiences at the Laguna festival taught him many things, but the most important was that his shows had found an audience. No longer content to create shows for other organizations, Bob and Alton decided in the middle of 1961 that it was time to create their own permanent puppet theater. But finding time to hunt for real estate was often difficult, since their grueling show schedule kept Bob and Alton on the road. Bob asked for help from his old friend, Tina Gainsboro, who worked with him at his Petite Theater. She found a space at 1345 West 1st Street in the Echo Park neighborhood near downtown Los Angeles. The building was big enough to house a large marionette theater, as well as several workshop areas. Built in 1953, it was a one-story structure with a simple, unassuming design and 7,500 square feet of breathing space. The building had once been a Hollywood prop shop used by Academy Award-winning scenic painter M. B. Paul; the high ceilings once used to house movie sets now facilitated a fly gallery.

Since the neighborhood was designated for urban renewal, Bob was convinced they had gotten in on the ground floor of a great opportunity. In addition, the Los Angeles Music Center was set to open in downtown in 1964, and with that, the theatrical community would come alive with a burst. Bob and Alton wanted to be a part of that burst, but their fledgling company still needed a little financial support. That support came from puppet maker Helen Crail, an older puppeteer herself who believed in Bob's dream. With her help, Alton and Bob were able to purchase the building at the end of 1961 and move their large marionette workshop. Eventually, the two men bought out Crail's share in the building and business.



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The company was anxious to open the new theater in time for the holidays, but there was a lot of work to be done. Some in the community questioned the location of the Bob Baker Marionette Theater. With the nearby Los Angeles Music Center opening its doors soon, critics wondered why they hadn't purchased closer to the theatrical heart of the city. Bob responded: "We did not want to be a part of a performing arts complex or any other institution because we wanted to be separate from human theater. We believe puppet theater is a unique art that can be practiced

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effectively only in a setting where everything conforms to puppetry's need for changes in scale and proportion to fit the concept of individual puppet shows."

Bob believed that being separate, but still close, would keep the theaters as kindred spirits. Yet before construction could begin, the theater needed a design concept. While Bob was busy finishing *The Sketchbook Revue* for the Laguna Beach Festival of Arts, he and Alton hired Morton Haack and Yugoslavian art director Serge Krizman, known for his work on the original 1960s *Batman* television series, to design their new playhouse.

The final cost of remodeling the building was \$125,000 (\$1.1 million in 2021 dollars). But it was worth every penny. The building housed a theater and studio behind a courtyard with painted flowers, in addition to a storage space for 2,000 marionettes and props and scenery. The theater was easily identified by a huge clown named Toot perched inside the courtyard of the building, acting as a herald. Elegantly decorated in red velvet with crystal chandeliers, the theater had a grand proscenium and a beautiful party patio, where refreshments were served after each performance.