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THE BABY ISSUE!

BABY STEPS TO A HAPPY MOM

HOW SMOG HURTS – EVEN BEFORE BIRTH

+ SHOOTING STARS MEET THIS YEAR'S COVER KIDS, AND OTHER CUTIES

Shooting Stars
Baby Winner Sienna



Bob Baker: Puppet Master

What were you doing when you were 7 years old? I don't remember much, but I think bubble gum and Barbie dolls were key interests. But Bob Baker knows exactly what he was doing: learning his life's work.

"When I was 7, I bought puppets at Bullock's Wilshire," recalls Baker, now a youthful 87. "The toy department woman trained me and, by the time I was 8, the store sent me out to do birthday party shows."

That early inspiration spawned a career that includes animation credits in TV and film, marionettes sold around the world, touring shows and, yes, many a children's party performance. Founded in 1960, his landmark L.A. theater – a former scene shop – was declared an historic cultural monument last year. He's seen generations come through the doors to catch one of his classic, theater-in-the-round shows. Recalls Baker, "My favorite is the 40-year-old who brought his friends who came here to celebrate his 5th birthday!"

The theater has struggled financially, yet Baker still dreams of a partnership with his alma mater Hollywood High or USC or UCLA to bring it up to state of the art.

Although Baker stopped major performances last September due to health issues, we caught up with him just before he went on stage to bring a tap-dancing marionette to life.

How have kids changed over the years?

Our shows haven't changed that much, but the audience reacts differently. Children are exposed to new experiences much earlier through preschool and TV. Children are not frightened. Witches are now funny – they used to scare kids. [During the show, kids] join in and sing along and applaud as before but they understand the stories better than they used to.

Just how many marionettes are stored in your theater?

There are 3,000 working puppets! Some of the characters are 40 years old. I've had some kind of input in making most all – from adding a polka dot to a costume to painting or carving them. I'm still doing quite a bit and trying to pass it on to the staff. And I'm starting to finish a lot of old

puppets that have been "hanging around."

What's the difference between a puppet and a marionette?

Everything is a puppet – the whole field. There are string puppets or marionettes; hand puppets; rod puppets; shadow puppets; lap puppets (like a ventriloquist uses); stop-action, frame-by-frame filmed puppets of many types; and Muppets – a hand-puppet/rod-puppet combo. And governments! Anything controlled by man is a puppet, so I always have to add that!

Your favorite show?

It's the 1979 bicentennial of Los Angeles – *L.A. Óle*. We built models of the city and even copied old signs for a multimedia show celebrating the founding of L.A. through the present. Well, the present then. Now we'd have to add the new Ritz downtown. One show I'd like to do again is *Hansel and Gretel* – in our version the witch was no longer a cannibal and the step-mother wasn't cruel!

What's next for Bob Baker Marionette Theater?

Magic Strings starts our 51st season. It's the best acts of the past year or two. Different numbers like a crazy opera singer, a spring theme, a carnival, Japanese music. Then, puppet instruments do the finale with dueling banjos and pianos, and several waltzes, including "The Blue Danube." And we still tour – three units play shows during holidays, two during the regular year. We used to go to Canada and across the U.S., but now keep it to California. We have 20 on the theater staff now – would love to expand if we were able to raise more capital

Still have the Christmas spirit? *Bob Baker's Nutcracker!* concludes the theater's 50th anniversary with shows until Jan. 16. Catch *Magic Strings* starting Jan. 22. For show times and details, visit www.BobBakerMarionettes.com. ♦

Chat Room columnist Vivien Santana Hughes is a former *L.A. Parent* editor and the mother of three – two sons in college and (surprise!) a 5-year-old daughter. She lives with her family in La Cañada-Flintridge.

As L.A. landmark Bob Baker Marionette Theater concludes its 50th anniversary year, its namesake icon celebrates 80 years of puppetry – and is still up there pulling strings.

