



Puppet Patter

The Official Publication of the Chicagoland Puppetry Guild

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Fire at Bob Kramer's Marionettes in St. Louis

by Dave Herzog



The worldwide puppetry community has been shocked and saddened at the news of a devastating fire at Bob Kramer's Marionette Theater in St. Louis.

The fire began in the early evening hours of Friday, January 20th and quickly grew to a two-alarm blaze, with over 60 fire fighters working to contain it. A neighbor's eyewitness report stated that initially both Bob Kramer and his partner Doug (Dug) Feltch were able to escape the building, but Bob went back in to try to rescue their pets and never made it back out. A body was found the next morning in the rubble and was identified several days later as that of Bob Kramer (77).

Bob Kramer had been a professional puppeteer since the age of fifteen and had met Dug Feltch (whose nickname was given to him by Bil Baird), when they worked together on Bobby Clark's *Pinocchio* at the Museum of Science and Industry in Chicago in the late 60s.

Bob and Dug were a team in puppetry and in life for nearly fifty years and their theater had entranced St. Louis for over four decades. Bob and Dug were also well known in the community of The Puppeteers of America and were fixtures at national puppetry festivals for many years.

Sadly, the fire in the building that housed their theater and their second story home resulted in a complete loss of the building and its contents. While there are a few examples of Bob's work in the hands of collectors, sadly Bob lost his life and it is estimated that over 700 puppets and marionettes were destroyed in the blaze. It is a devastating loss of a kind and extremely talented man, and the marionettes that would have been a legacy to entertain inspire people for decades to come.



Very few puppeteers had ever achieved the level of expertise that Bob was capable of. He was a brilliant graphic artist, sculptor, wood carver, and painter - renowned for the perfect finish on his marionettes. Very few people have the level of patience that is required to produce puppets and marionettes on the level of perfection of those of Bob Kramer's Marionettes.

The Bob Kramer's Marionettes Facebook page has been left up, there is a go fund me campaign to help Dug, and remembrances and condolences can be left on the page. <https://kramersmarionettes.com>



Authors note: The spelling of "marionettes" in this article is the spelling used by Bob Kramer's Marionettes. At the age of nineteen I had the great good fortune to work with Bob Kramer for about a year. Like anyone who worked with Bob my life is richer for having known him.

The Chicagoland Puppetry Guild Files

by Dave Herzog

The Chicagoland Puppetry Guild files were meticulously kept by Fred Putz for decades. While perusing this amazing collection of Chicago, national, and international puppetry ephemera, I continue to discover files of historical significance or special note. I am fortunate to be able to share my findings as a regular feature in each quarterly issue of The Puppet Patter. Appearing in this Issue...

Burr Tillstrom

October 13th 1917 to December 6th 1985

Whenever I speak with young people in the business of puppetry, names of puppeteers often come up. Arguably, there has never been a more famous name in Chicago puppetry than that of Burr Tillstrom. Burr Tillstrom and the television show *Kukla Fran and Ollie* will always be an important part of American Television history. He was, in fact, the first national prime time television star and in their time Burr Tillstrom, The Kuklapolitan players and Fran Allison were household names known to everybody in the USA.

Still, often when talking to young puppeteers, I will mention *Kukla, Fran and Ollie* and I am met with a blank stare and "Who was that?" I am asked (this from youngsters who can name every *Fraggle* that ever was) I will suggest they look up Kukla, Fran and Ollie on YouTube, or Facebook. I hope by doing so I open their eyes to the genius who was the king of prime time television puppetry long before Jim Henson.

Burr Tillstrom's accomplishments were so vast that it literally takes a book to list them all. He was in at the very ground floor of television, working with Gary Moore in Marshall Fields' state street store doing a demonstration of Television in 1939. In 1947 RCA came to Chicago seeking to put on a television show for children and asked Burr to work with an a live "assistant" out front of the puppet booth. An official of WBKB knew Fran Allison and she was asked to take on the role. Burr and Fran sat at a coffee shop and talked over what they would do on the show and, with no rehearsal, puppetry and television history was born. In the following ten years of live television they never used a script. Fran was once quoted as saying "You don't use a script when talking to friends."



Whatever one's memories of *Kukla, Fran and Ollie*, there are favorite characters and episodes that come to mind. My personal favorite was their frequent productions of *The Mikado* with Fran, Madame Oglepuss and Beulah Witch (my personal favorite Kuklapolitan Player) as the three little maids from school, with disastrous and hilarious results that often had the television crew audibly laughing offstage during the live broadcast. And poor Madame Oglepuss left a shambles and dramatically fainting on a chase lounge, or at least it always seemed a chase lounge was available to poor Madame Oglepuss. After all she needed one frequently.

In later years, Burr performed the Emmy and Peabody Award winning hand ballet *The Berlin Wall* on the satirical and often controversial *That Was the*

Week That Was television show. Live shows at Ravinia music festival in Highland Park were a must see for many fans, and Burr took over in the National Tour of *Side by Side* by Sondheim after star Cyril Ritchard passed away during the Chicago Run. The Kuklapolitan players hosted the CBS children's film festival, Burr even wrote a delightful children's book *The Dragon Who Lived Downstairs*, which was produced as a play by the Theater Works of De Paul University, which has now been turned into a puppet play by Anne Newman of Puppet Folks Productions.

Sadly, we do not have a large file on Burr Tillstrom in the Guild archives because Burr was really far too busy to be a part of the Guild. I have recently added to the file a copy of the *Dragon Who lived Downstairs*, a center spread from a 1971 edition of the *Puppetry Journal* which both Burr and Fran autographed for me at the Ravinia Festival, and three separate Wikipedia articles on Burr, Fran and the show.



Fortunately, there are several Facebook Groups dedicated to Kukla, Fran and Ollie, and YouTube as many wonderful KFO videos. Folks in Saugatuck, Michigan, (where Burr maintained a summer home) whose historical society has one of the largest archives of Burr Tillstrom memorabilia, is working on a documentary about KFO containing astounding footage of Burr sitting and remembering his career and philosophies. I encourage everybody interested in puppetry to take an occasional visit down memory lane to a gentler time when Kukla Fran and Ollie would open the show by singing...

Here we are,
Back with you again.
Yes by-gum and
yes by-golly,
Kukla, Fran,
And dear old Ollie.
Here we are again.
Here we are again.
Here we are again.
HERE
WE
ARE
AGAAAAAAAAAAAIN!



Obituaries

Burr Tillstrom, 68, legendary puppeteer

By Jerry Crimmins

Services were being arranged Saturday for Burr Tillstrom, 68, a legend of the early years of television as creator of the "Kukla, Fran, and Ollie" show that was seen daily by millions of viewers in the 1950s.

The man who was the voice and the life of all the puppets he called the "Kuklapolitans," died Friday in Palm Springs, Calif.

Mr. Tillstrom was a native of Chicago's North Side. He started his TV show here with Fran Allison on the old WBKB-TV station in 1947. The show later was seen on the NBC and ABC networks.

Mr. Tillstrom, the winner of three Emmys as well as two Peabody Awards, television's top award, and more than 50 other awards, died quietly while reading his newspaper at the side of his swimming pool, according to his brother, Richard. He had moved to Palm Springs from Chicago only this year.

Mr. Tillstrom's gallery of puppet characters included Beulah Witch, Fletcher Rabbit, Madame Oglepuss, Buff Orpington and others.

But the most famous were Kukla, a wise, gently mocking, self-aware clown, and Oliver J. Dragon, known as Ollie, an impetuous, bragging, one-toothed dragon who got himself into fixes that he would regret.

Born in Chicago in 1917, Mr. Tillstrom started putting on shows with teddy bears for his parents when he was 6 or 7 years old, he once said.

A graduate of Senn High School, he attended the University of Chicago for a while but found he was more interested in performing with his puppets for money.

He came of age in the Depression and said he might have become an actor but couldn't get a job on radio and performed only in amateur plays.

He discovered that what people really responded to was his puppet shows.

In 1935, he went to work for the Chicago Park District, which had started a puppet theater under the auspices of the federal Works Progress Administration (WPA), an agency created to give work to the unemployed.

He made the hand puppet, Kukla, during his WPA days, and worked him without a name for six months, gradually developing the character.

When a Russian ballerina, Tamara Toumanova, came to Chicago, Mr. Tillstrom went to see her backstage.

"I brought the puppet out of my pocket," he recalled. "Toumanova was looking in the mirror, and I put him over her shoulder. She looked up and said, 'Ah, Kukla,' which means doll. It's a term of endearment in Russian, also in Greek," he once told an interviewer.

In the late 1930s, Mr. Tillstrom made his living doing vaudeville shows, private parties and shows for schools and women's clubs.

The first television "Fran" was Gary Moore. Moore, Durward Kirby, and Ransom Sherman worked with Mr. Tillstrom in a television demonstration show at Chicago's Marshall Field & Co. store in 1939.

Fran Allison, a former Iowa schoolteacher turned radio singer, said in a telephone interview from her home in Van Nuys, Calif., that she got to know Mr. Tillstrom during World War II, at shows staged in Chicago to raise money for the war effort.

"I would be a guest at the war bonds shows," she said Friday after learning of Mr. Tillstrom's death. "He had a little stage. His mother used to play the piano for him. I would just talk" to the puppets.

"But I didn't know" the puppet characters "as I came to know them when we worked so closely together," she said.

In 1947, she said, RCA came to Chicago seeking to put on a television show for children and asked Mr. Tillstrom to do a one-hour show on WBKB. Mr. Tillstrom said he wanted to have a live performer assist him in front of the stage. An official of WBKB, who knew Allison from several appearances she had made at the station, asked her to take the job, she said.

Before their first show, Mr. Tillstrom and Allison talked over in a coffee shop what they would do and then went on the air without a script. In 10 years of television, the two never used a script, Allison said.

With the backing of his producer, Beulah Zachary, Mr. Tillstrom rejected a proposal that the show have a staff of writers. Instead, he and Allison created the conversations out of ordinary events.

The show was soon a major hit with adults as well as children.

Sets were nearly bare and special effects nonexistent in the early days of television.

Mr. Tillstrom said: "I like it when Kukla and Ollie

come up with a table and a pot and say, 'This is a kitchen.' . . . When they [the characters] go down to the workshop, or down to the mailroom, you don't see that. I don't know where all that stuff is myself, but it was there. We all believed it, didn't we?"

Allison described her relationship with the characters—each of whom was Mr. Tillstrom—this way:

"Kukla and I, I really believe, were closer than any of the others. Kukla was wise and kind and dear. Ollie I adored because all of us feel like him sometimes. He was the kind of person I think all of us would have liked to have been. He accepted all the adulation that came his way because he just thought it was due him. And he would get wild ideas, but the ideas were never the kind that would hurt anybody else.

Mr. Tillstrom said Allison "never went backstage. She never looked at the puppets when they weren't performing. She just didn't want to see them that way."

Mr. Tillstrom added: "I never want to show them that way either, exhibit them, make copies of them. I see no reason to destroy the illusion I worked so hard to create."

Their principal show premiered in 1957.

For nine years in the 1950s, Tillstrom and Allison and their pets hosted the CBS Children's Film Festival once a week. A regular "Kukla Fran and Ollie" show came back briefly in 1970, and later season, on NBC stations in cities.

Mr. Tillstrom also presided over live theater performances in Chicago and around the country, including for several years in 1979, a holiday season in the Goodman Theatre.

After he left television, Tillstrom was also artist in residence for several years at the National Educational Television network in 1970, and later season, on NBC stations in cities.

Allison said Mr. Tillstrom phoned her Nov. 20 from home in Palm Springs and two [real] friends sang birthday to her.

"Then Beulah Witch came and said, 'How old are you?' Madame Oglepuss came and asked the same question then came on and said, 'That's not a nice thing to do.'"

Mr. Tillstrom was a bachelor. His nearest survivor is his brother, Richard.

Authors note: One of the most astounding things to me about Burr Tillstrom's musical performances with Fran was that even though it was only Burr and Fran singing live I always felt I heard all three characters singing, together. For decades Burr Tillstrom made us all believe that the Kuklapolitan players were real living beings, and in a way they all were, such was the magic of Burr Tillstrom.

Anywhere - by Théâtre de l'Entrouvert (France)

by Dave Herzog

Of all the shows being presented at the Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival, (January 18th to 29th, 2023) the production I most wanted to see was *Anywhere* by Théâtre de l'Entrouvert from France. All though sold out at the time, I tried to by tickets for this American remounting of the piece. Thanks to the kindness of puppeteer Mark Blashford, I was invited to the final dress rehearsal which was presented for an invited audience of about fifty people.

Unfortunately, The Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival does not provide programs to its audience members so I must rely on my memories and feelings about the show gleaned from only one viewing. This was a show I gladly would have attended more than once, as it left me with a very powerful impression.

The following is a quote from the festival's general program book, which gives an overview of the performances but no performers or producer's credits, something the Festiva needs to correct in future.

"A marionette made of ice will melt your heart in Anywhere, an exquisite, landmark string-marionette work by the French Company Theatre de l'Entrouvert. Freely inspired by Henry Bauchau's novel "Oedipus on the Road", Anywhere evokes the long wandering of Oedipus accompanied by his daughter Antigone. The fallen Oedipus appears in the form of an ice puppet that gradually melts, then appears in the form of mist, and finally disappears in the forest. Anywhere traces with gentleness and strength a poetic journey in black and white, of fire and ice, which speaks to us about our bodies, our environment, and our fragilities, and our wanderings in the infinite circle of renewal"

Entering the mainstage space of Chicago's Chopin Theater, a textured circular playing area is visible in the center of the large stage. Up stage right there is what appears to be to be a forest of white strings, upstage left a covered rectangular object is present. The stage lights dim and the now uncovered object appears suspended center stage. At first glance it appears to be some sort of shadow screen, but it is in fact a suspended block of ice. A slowly moving human figure appears played by a live performer. It is Oedipus's daughter, Antigone, who begins to paint a message on the ice stating that Oedipus's eyes have healed and no longer bleed black tears. As Antigone moves away the block of ice shatters into the circle on the stage floor.



Oedipus, appearing as a short string marionette, is seen upstage crossing the length of the stage floor with bits of ice being thrown at him from off stage. When Oedipus exits the three foot tall ice marionette of Oedipus is revealed and is moved center stage to interact for the rest of the show with Antigone. The interaction and their journey makes up the remainder of the piece. While the performers and director no doubt have a clear concept of the piece, much still is left to the audience to interpret as they will. The piece is rather slow, dare I say glacial in its pace, but I found it moving, and for me it began to invoke powerful memories of the last forty eight hours of my Father's life.

The performers themselves create powerful images and movement. The performer playing Antigone is first and foremost completely immersed in the reality of the puppet playing Oedipus, this is of utmost importance for without that the piece would not work. Physically this is no small task as she helps lift a heavy marionette clutches it to her body and shows the deep compassion of child for beloved parent, all the while standing and at times rolling around on a stage floor covered in a combination of cold water, what appeared to be milk and chunks of ice. The physicality alone of the role is a marathon in a 50-minute theater piece. The ballet between marionette and actor is deeply moving, and precisely choreographed.

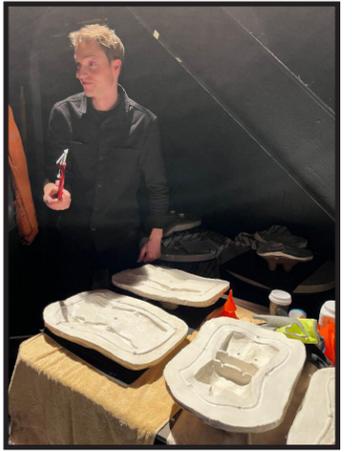
Marionette performer Mark Blashford has the herculean task of manipulating the heavy three foot tall marionette made of ice which has seventeen meter long (55.7 foot) strings, going from the Dwiggin's style marionette up to the ceiling of the theater over to an offstage spot and back down to the stage floor. The heavy nylon cord strings are attached to a nine string airplane style marionette control that must be manipulated with the opposite inputs of a

normal marionette control. It is astonishing that a puppeteer could get any movement at all, that this marionette is endowed with incredibly subtle and life like movement is a tribute not only to the designer of the figure (which, by the way, must be recreated on its ingenious internal framework for every performance) but of Mark Blashford's advanced skill with marionettes. The interaction of the marionette and Antigone is breathtaking, and one can not help but feel invested in their journey. At no time during the performance does the ice marionette seem like a gimmick, the audience is invested in the reality of the character, as it melts and loses its life force.

It is hard for an audience member, especially for one who has built and operated marionettes, not to want to glance to operator of the figure. Indeed, it is essential that the audience does as Oedipus melts and the puppeteer is left as his remaining soul, as Oedipus dissolves into a dense fog emanating from the ring of the circular playing area.

At the end the audience found themselves momentarily stunned until they burst into enthusiastic applause for the spectacle they witnessed, and the emotions they had shared.

How wonderful it is that, at least for a few days in January, puppetry takes center stage in Chicago's theater community thanks to the dedication of Blair Thomas and his extraordinary staff. One can only hope that with puppetry pieces the quality of *Anywhere* being produced more theaters in Chicago and nationwide will include puppetry in their theater seasons.



The following was retrieved from the following website:

<https://chicagopuppetfest.org/wp-content/uploads/2023/01/2023-Program-Anywhere.pdf>



CHICAGO
INTERNATIONAL
PUPPET
THEATER
FESTIVAL

ARTISTIC TEAM

Artistic Direction - Elise Vigneron
Scenography & Design - Elise Vigneron
Original Show Staging - Elise Vigneron and Hélène Barreau
Excerpts from - *Cedipe sur la route* by Henry Bauchau
U.S. Stage Director - Claire Saxe
Puppeteer - Mark Blashford
Performer/Dancer - Ashwaty Chennat
Puppet Design - Vincent Debuire. and Hélène Barreau,
assisted by Alma Roccella
Ice Puppet Technician - Mark Blashford
Lighting and Technical Direction - Richard Norwood
Production Technician - Beth Richards
Sound and Run Crew - Corey Douglas Smith
Production Manager - Julie Le Corre
Music - Pascal Charrier, Robin Fincker,
Sylvain Darrifourcq, Julien Tamisier
Original Technical Artists - Thibaut Boislève et Corentin Abeille
Managing Producer - Sandy Smith Gerding
Artistic Coordination - Blair Thomas
Tour Development & Manager - Yolanda Cesta Cursach Montilla
Project Advocacy - Julie Moller

Co-producers: Chicago International Puppet Theater Festival & Théâtre de l'Entrouvert

Dave Herzog's Marionettes to Teach in Las Vegas Summer 2023

Dave Herzog, of Chicago's Dave Herzog's Marionettes, will be teaching in Las Vegas, NV, at The Land Schools LLC July 28th through 30th, 2023. This will be Dave's third teaching assignment for The Land Schools. This year's subject is the Trapeze Artist marionette.

Each student will receive an unpainted 22" tall wooden trapeze marionette designed and built by Dave Herzog especially for this unique trick routine. The students will also receive a control, trapeze prop, as well as a choice of beautiful custom-made costumes. In addition, there will be a set of patterns for the carved body parts, costume, as well as a black cloth protective bag for their marionette.

Over the course of this intense but amazingly creative weekend the students will paint, wig and style and string their marionettes with supplies provided by The Land Schools. The last day, with fully strung figures Dave Herzog will teach the students the choreography he uses in his own version of the trapeze act.

Along the way, there will be some very good food, comradery and some good stories swapped, not to mention a chance to sample those famous Las Vegas shows. Don't be out too late however, as class starts promptly at 9:00 AM each day.

Dave will share his extensive knowledge about marionette variety shows in general and his expertise of the Trapeze marionette - an act he has performed over seven thousand times in the last twenty-five years. The Trapeze is one of the great classics of the marionette variety show and is also the perfect act for buskers and street performers.

More information about Dave's class, along with the other amazing classes and products of The Land Schools, can be found on The Land School's website at www.thelandschools.com. Payment plans, and discount codes can be found on the site. Only 16 more spaces are available for this class.



Emails To The Editor

Greetings!

It was once called "Letters to the Editor". Now that we're well into the 21st century, let's call it "Emails to the Editor." If you have something to say, any comments, pro or con, any unanswered questions on your mind, talk to your computer and we'll listen in. Whatcha got going on these days? We'd like to hear from you.

Cheers!

Mel

(please send emails to Mel Biske at melikinpuppets@comcast.net and put the subject as "Patter Email to the Editor")

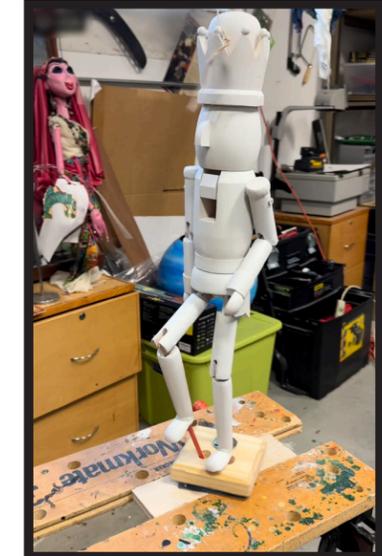


Hi Mel,

Thanks as always for sending out the Patter:) After a long pandemic hiatus Von Orthal Puppets is back at it. Tiffany Lange and I, here at VOP have been commissioned to build puppets for the Milwaukee Ballet's *Nutcracker*, opening in December 2023. I'll send you a few preliminary photos if you want them. Aside from this, I am now the full time woodworking and sculpture teacher at the Chicago Waldorf School, teaching grades 6-12 , introducing puppetry to the young!! :)

Peace,

Cynthia



Dear Mel,

I had a few gigs last month and nothing is going on for now in my puppetry world. Too busy with upcoming events. I was chosen as one of the story telling performers at the Goodman Theatre Generations program to perform my story with Pierre, the vegan chef puppet. Unfortunately, COVID finally got me the night before so Pierre and I could not perform. Nitsana

(Check out Nitsana's Facebook page for more of her doings at <https://www.facebook.com/nitsana.lazerus>)

Hi Mel

Thank you for all your support at the group. I would like share my event at the Oak Park Library. My presentation has music, puppet (Monchi), story about Carnivale, and finish with art project. My art project is a paper puppet about 2 animals Vicuña and Vizcacha I am very happy for this. This is my first public presentation.

Thank you,
Kathy Valdivia



SPANISH STORYTIME WITH KATHY

Join us for a Spanish language Storytime facilitated by Kathy. Come hear stories, songs, and dance from Latin America. We will be learning about the Aymara people and Andean Carnaval. For children ages 3 to 6 years.

SATURDAY, FEBRUARY 18 at 11:30 AM
OAK PARK PUBLIC LIBRARY
MAIN LIBRARY
834 LAKE STREET, OAK PARK

Register @ oppl.org/calendar

OAK PARK PUBLIC LIBRARY

Hey Mel,

I have an item that I would like to bring with me to Potlatch next November. It is for the Dutch auction being planned to raise money for the Great Lakes Region. I have two pictures I am sending. You can see how it relates directly to puppeteers. I believe the height is about 6 or 7 inches. I believe it is commercially made so it is not a single original piece. A neighbor dropped it off while my husband was working in the garage and knowing we were involved in puppetry thought we would like to have it. I turned it over and found out it was also a wind-up music box. It plays, "When you wish upon a star". There is no company name, but there is a logo of probably the mark of the artist. If any one knows the history of this item it may help in the eventual value to be sold.

Susan Witek



Dear Editor,

I have recently been going through my collection of puppets and realized that I will never be using some of them again. I am submitting photos of my treasured memories with a brief explanation (shown on next page). Anyone interested in any or all may feel free to contact me through email at sbmarcus@gmail.net.

Susan Bass Marcus



(left) Blue "Ray Moore" Clown hand puppet, signed, from the 1970's. Posed with pink sleepy moth puppet by Possum Town Puppets, both about 18" and "Ray Moore" Clown hand puppet - isolated view.

(below) Magician hand puppet also "Ray Moore" type puppet, 15" with under- body.



(left clockwise)
Mask, Wolf, felt on lite plaster, fits my head, eye holes.
Mask, Pig in curlers, same as Wolf mask.
3 Little Pigs, isolated view.
3 Little Pigs, my creations, will throw in wolf puppet.



(above)
Giveaway: Some bits and pieces from a presentation of Leo Lionni's, "Alexander and the Windup Mouse" that I performed at the Children's Hospital. Mouse is a hand puppet with fingering arms and head, about 12" long. Props are on rods and include the windup mouse, cup, saucer and spoon.



(above)
My creations: Clown, two views: unfinished. Head and feet only.

The CPG is on Facebook, too!
Be sure to check us out!



Have You Checked Out the CPG Website Lately?



Be sure to visit our guild's web site on a regular basis for the latest postings on what's happening in the Chicago area and a roster of active and newly added puppeteers, current and past issues of the Puppet Pater, and more!

Our address is:

www.chicagopuppetguild.org



Leave 'em Laughin'!

BIZARRO by Dan Piraro

