

## **THE HENSON FOUNDATION: THE FIRST TEN YEARS (1982-1992)**

**By Nancy Lohman Staub 2010 (ed. February 2015)**

Jim Henson cared deeply about promoting and developing puppetry as an art form, not just an entertainment for children. He served on boards of puppetry organizations to further this cause. In 1975, he called a meeting at the Detroit Institute of the Arts (DIA) to discuss ways to promote puppetry with the American public. He sponsored the 1980 World Festival of Puppetry in Washington, D.C. to help realize this purpose. After the festival, he decided to create the Henson Foundation to continue to pursue this goal. Jim Henson's vision for promoting and developing the art of puppetry continues through the foundation he created, now known as the Jim Henson Foundation. As his partner, Jane Henson gave her support to all of these endeavors.

Jim Henson served as President of Puppeteers of America (PofA) from 1962-1963. He acted as co-chairman, along with Jane Henson, of the 1963 annual PofA National Festival at Hurleyville, New York. He served as President of UNIMA-USA from its inception in 1966. UNIMA-USA<sup>1</sup> is the American Center of l'Union Internationale de la Marionnette (UNIMA) founded in 1929. With representatives in over 85 nations, UNIMA claims to be the oldest international theater organization and is a member organization of UNESCO. Jim financed the incorporation of UNIMA-USA in 1979 and continued to serve as President through 1980.

As President of UNIMA-USA Jim Henson called a meeting in 1975 at the DIA for anyone concerned about the art of puppetry. He enforced one condition for attendance, which was that participants leave their puppets at home. Leading American professional puppeteers including Jim and Jane Henson, George Latshaw, Bil Baird, Professor Frank Ballard - director of the UCONN Puppetry Program, Dr. Mel Helstein from the UCLA Theatre Department, and representatives of PofA and UNIMA-USA participated, including myself as Vice-President of PofA. Dr. Audley Grossman, curator of the DIA Department of Performing Arts, organized the event. The DIA held the largest collection of puppets in the USA and was the perfect setting for this conference. About 50 individuals discussed ways to promote puppetry as an art form in America. The first priority by general consensus was to present the best possible puppetry performances throughout the United States. As there were few American professional companies that

performed for adults, international festivals and tours of famous European puppeteers were proposed. The group decided to urge UNIMA-USA to bid for hosting the 1980 Congress of UNIMA in the USA. They suggested PofA might co-host that event in lieu of a national festival. The group also set the goal of creating a network of puppetry centers, which would sponsor tours of puppet companies. Other priorities included professional training and apprenticeship of puppet artists, publication and conferences of puppet theater criticism and research, and exhibitions of the art of puppetry. Fundraising for these priorities became a major issue. Rachel Redinger, statutory agent for PofA, proposed the creation of a North American Puppetry Foundation for this purpose. Her proposal planted the seeds of the Henson Foundation.

As President of the American Center of UNIMA-USA, Jim Henson endorsed my proposal that the 1980 World Puppetry Festival take place at the Kennedy Center and Georgetown University in Washington, DC. As President of PofA. I volunteered to serve as festival director, later taking the title of Executive Director for fundraising purposes. Jim personally participated in the planning and execution of the event, guaranteeing any financial shortfall, a guarantee without which it could not have happened. The popularity of the Muppets opened many doors.

30 groups from 20 countries performed and over 62,000 attended the performances at the festival in Washington DC and on tour. With exhibitions at the Smithsonian Institution and Corcoran Gallery as well as a 10 city tour for the exhibition "Puppets: Art & Entertainment", the total people reached by the performances and exhibitions neared 3,000,000. The television special of the festival, *Here Come the Puppets*, hosted by Jim Henson and Kermit the Frog, played nationally on PBS 3 times and was distributed internationally. Although the series we envisioned could not be realized at the time, Jim later created *Jim Henson Presents*.

The goals included: to raise consciousness of the vast scope and high quality of the art of puppetry throughout the world; to broaden the audience base for puppetry in North America; increase credibility of organized puppetry with governmental and cultural institutions; to serve as a springboard for further activities designed to preserve, promote, and develop the art of puppetry. A strong indication of the success of this project was that the National Endowment for the Arts added puppetry as a performance category and several puppeteers received grants.

After the 1980 World Puppetry Festival, Jim Henson sought ways to continue pursuing these goals. He consulted with me, as I had demonstrated my dedication to

puppetry by organizing it and remained in Washington DC working at the Kennedy Center and as a reviewer for the National Endowment for the Arts. I proposed Jim might create a foundation to promote puppetry. The prestige of grants with his name could stimulate additional funding from other sources including the NEA. Having experienced the complexity and volatility of elected boards of puppetry organizations, Jim agreed it would be best to establish his own foundation. He wanted his family to participate in the foundation so it originally bore only his family name. Jim Henson, Jane Henson and Henson Productions donated all services, expenses and the funding annually. From the beginning, I gave my time, and friends in New York City gave me lodging to preserve resources for the artists. I used to say, "my time, your money."

The Henson Foundation was incorporated in 1982 with the invaluable assistance of Larry Schilling, a legal advisor to various foundations. The stated goals of the Henson Foundation were: to promote, develop, and encourage understanding of and public interest in the art of puppetry and allied arts; to promote, encourage and develop talent in the creation and performance of works in the field of puppetry and allied arts; and to give recognition to experiments and achievements in the field of puppetry and allied arts. The original board of directors consisted of Jim and Jane Henson, Al Gottesman, and Bob Bromberg. Over the years, they were joined by other members of Henson Production staff, family members and professionals in the field of puppetry. Each year, we discussed holding an international festival in New York City, but Jim did not feel ready to move forward until, ironically, 1990.

Jim Henson and other board members expressed preference to fund artists on "the cutting edge." Technical and artistic innovation became the highest criteria for funding projects. Productions for adult audiences were a priority, as puppetry for children was more popular and generally self-supporting. *The Muppet Show* had broken ground for success with adult audiences on television, but theater audiences were less receptive.

The Board awarded one of its first and largest grants to Julie Taymor. Her production of *Way of Snow* at the 1980 World Puppetry Festival earned international admiration. The board recognized Julie Taymor's unique talent deserved all the support it could offer. The Henson Foundation's contributions helped sustain Julie Taymor in her early career. She has since achieved great success including Tony Awards for her creation *The Lion King* on Broadway. The list of Henson Foundation grantees reads like a *Who's Who in American Puppetry*. The Henson Foundation grants became a kind of seal of approval to other potential funders. Many of the artists expressed gratitude for the

psychological support, which was very significant to them. The Board also awarded matching funds to UNIMA-USA for national tours of international puppet artists. German puppeteer Albrecht Roser with his world famous marionette show *Gustaf and his Ensemble* most certainly raised understanding and appreciation for the field of puppetry across the country.

In its first 10 years, the Henson Foundation played a major role in the creation and presentation of puppetry in America. Of course, it cannot prove to what extent the explosion of puppetry in America it can claim. Several grantees became celebrated artists receiving national and international recognition. The increased number and variety of venues for puppetry around the United States and sold out houses at the first NY Jim Henson International Festival (1992) testified to the increased awareness of puppetry by the American public. The coverage of the festival by the NY Times and other major newspapers and journals proved that puppetry for adults has arrived as a theater form. The blossoming of an annual National Puppetry Conference at the prestigious Eugene O'Neill Theater Center in Connecticut demonstrated respect for the art. The UCONN program gained momentum and trained a large number of theater students as well as puppeteers. The Center for Puppetry Arts in Atlanta, recipient of several grants from the Henson Foundation, received funding for both adult and family series from other foundations, corporations, and from local and federal governments. Other puppetry centers including the Northwest Puppet Center in Seattle, In the Heart of the Beast Mask and Puppet Theatre in Minneapolis, the Puppet Co. in the Washington DC area, and the Puppet Show Place in the Boston area served large constituencies and enjoyed broad community support. The first ten years of the Jim Henson Foundation fulfilled its goals of promoting and developing talent in the creation and performance of works and the understanding of the public in the field of puppetry. The next ten years proved to be even more successful under the leadership of Cheryl Henson as President from 1992. The board voted to change the name to the Jim Henson Foundation in honor of its founder. As one of the original donors and board members, Jane Henson was instrumental in the creation and continuance of the Foundation. Leslee Asch served as an invaluable liaison between puppeteers and Jim. Leslee became the Executive Director of the Foundation from 1985 until 2000. She served as producing director of the Jim Henson International Festival from 1992-2000. UCONN Alumni Lindsey "Z." Briggs is the current manager of the Foundation.