

The Bob Baker Conspiracy

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By 2008, fifty five years into the life of the marionette theater he founded with Alton Wood, Bob Baker was \$30,000 behind on his mortgage. The financial crash had hit his bread and butter business of birthday parties hard, LAUSD was cutting back on field trips, and past business decisions were proving costly. But as a fixture of Los Angeles, Baker's woes did garner some sympathy. The New York Times ran an article headlined "Forget Citigroup, Puppet Theater Needs a Bailout," and the next year the LA City Council voted to grant Baker's theater Historic Landmark Status, motivated in part by a mid-hearing puppet show. Unfortunately, that same year Baker put his Marionette Theater up for sale, and in 2013 it was bought by a Calabasas dwelling tech entrepreneur, who soon rolled out plans for the type of mixed used luxury apartment complex that makes heroes of arsons. Bob Baker passed away in 2014 at the age of ninety.

The miracle of all of this is that the theater isn't closing. To continue Baker's legacy, the people and puppets of BBMT have managed to patch organizational holes, stabilize finances, and secure a promising new home for the theater in Highland Park. Still, Bob Baker devoted nearly a century of his human life to puppetry. His creations should of course live on, but a contribution of this scale warrants some kind of equally monumental attempt to preserve and archive these achievements.

Establishing the Marionette Theater as an official Los Angeles landmark seems the perfect answer to this challenge. In reality, historic preservation at the city, state, and federal level, grants no authority which can absolutely stop the sale or destruction of a space. Status can delay construction and offer incentives for architectural preservation, but it's nothing that can really compete with the profit motive of a luxury apartment complex. For Baker and Wood's theater, the official products of landmark status are a set of prints and negatives taken during the final days of operation at the old location, some kind of didactic marker at the former site of the theater, and likely a few walls from the old structure incorporated into the new development.

Los Angeles County's Historic Preservation Program was established in 1962 by a group of architects, so it follows that historic landmark status would focus on the preservation of architecture, and not the actual inhabitants of these spaces. Blueprints, some detailed photographs, and some remnants of the original structure seem perfectly adequate to resurrect an old building, while being totally insufficient as an archive of a living breathing entity. Accordingly, the bulk of the commission's powers skew towards the preservation of photographs, for which there are strict requirements, and promises of safe storage until the collapse of the respective government. Oral histories, performance ephemera, or other potentially valuable documents are ignored by the land-marking process. So by way of consolidation, when Ian Byers-Gamber was hired as the Historic American Building Survey (HABS) documentarian, he essentially became responsible for producing Los Angeles' official archive of the theater.

A set of four by five inch negatives and eight by ten inch prints are hardly the archive Baker deserves, but before we despair, there is precedent for appropriately elaborate and fantastic reconstructions from such limited source material. Conspiracy theorists have done it for years, piecing together entire histories, civilizations even, from a single grainy photograph or errant newspaper article.

So it's appropriate that the photographs in this exhibition are technically separate from the official HABS documentation that Byers-Gamber was hired to take. As viewers we can respond secure in the knowledge that the REAL photographs have been kept from us, presumably ferreted off to some high security bunker. We're invited to allow suspicion and paranoia drive our consumption of these images, scrutinizing them relentlessly for any clues that can be gleaned.

Ian himself must be interrogated, and all puppeteers located and cross-examined. FOIA requests will have to be filed. We must get our hands on the original negatives and make enormous enlargements. Microfilm will be analyzed, CCTV footage reviewed, obscure toms on puppetry will be acquired. A road trip to a partially legible address should be planned. Motel clerks and old widowers interviewed. Living room walls must be cleared. We'll need twine, thumbtacks, and micro-cassette recorders. Most crucially, the new Marionette Theater must be visited. We should eat ice cream, and book birthday parties there. We need audience plants at every puppet show. We must all attend Bob Baker Day. Then with all conspiracies thwarted, pieces puzzled, and stories told, we will have our promised landmark.

The screenshot shows a forum post on the website /b/-Random. The post is titled "03_balloon clown_foranalysis.jpg" and is from an anonymous user. The image shows a woman in a white dress and a small puppet. Red circles and lines are drawn over the image, with labels 1 through 6 and 3a. A list of tasks is provided below the image:

1. visible line, multiple gets
2. trapezoidal reflection
- 2a. visible tear drop
- 2b. trace lipstick
3. widows peak
- 3a. enhance sideburn fastener
4. need this angle
5. hand connection point a
6. enhance

Below the image is a list of tasks:

1. shadow clearly unnatural
2. need to locate device
3. clear hand signal
- 3a. unnatural markings
4. 1:50 am, need confirmation
5. need colors
- 5a. deliberate coordination, need colors
6. freemasons

The post also includes a link to a "SEE INDEX TO PHOTOGRAPHS FOR CAPTION" and a "BBMT No. 3a" label. The forum interface includes navigation links like [Return], [Catalog], [Bottom], [Update], and [Auto].