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An Angel with St. Joseph, Virgin Mary, and Christ Child, as constructed by Vaclav Sladek.

Preserving the String:

The Legacy of Vaclav Sladek and Marionette Magic

By Dennis Listermann-Vierling

Vaclav Sladek (May 16, 1942–October 16, 2009) was a marionette maker whose career exemplifies the resilience of immigrant artisans in North America. While his business, Marionette Magic, operated primarily through regional craft circuits and lacked a permanent digital footprint, his artistic output remains a vital component of the living puppetry tradition. Today, the largest surviving collection of his work—comprising over 25 figures—is actively performed by New Bern Puppets in New Bern, North Carolina, ensuring that Sladek's contribution to the art form continues to evolve rather than stagnate.

Born in Prague, Sladek was immersed in a culture where puppetry is deeply woven into the national identity. In 1981, seeking stability for his family, he emigrated from Czechoslovakia, arriving in Saskatoon, Saskatchewan, Canada, in March 1982 with his children, Gabriela, Vaclav Jr., and Martin.[1] Like many immigrant craftsmen of the era, Sladek carried not only physical tools but a specific cultural methodology. His arrival coincided with a period of renewed interest in folk arts in the Canadian

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prairies. While he initially worked in various capacities, he formally established his marionette-making practice in 1987.[2] His work served as a cultural bridge, introducing the structural complexity of Czech marionette theater to an audience accustomed to the simpler aesthetics of North American folk art.

Marionette Magic

Operating under the banner of Marionette Magic, Sladek established a direct-to-consumer business model reliant on regional craft fairs, including the "Handmade House" and "Sundog" festivals, as well as personal commissions.[3] His portfolio was diverse, ranging from contemporary figures to historical and religious subjects.

Sladek's technical approach was distinct. While rooted in traditional Czech carving, his materials reflected his North American environment. He used a mix of ceramics for the hands, feet, and head, with the remainder of the body constructed from cloth and fabric, without internal stuffing. This construction method resulted in puppets that were notably flat in profile, leading New Bern Puppets to informally refer to them as "Flatsies."[4]

Unlike purely decorative figures, Sladek's puppets were engineered for rigorous performance. He employed a simple crossbar control system, with strings attached to both the marionette's feet and hands, allowing them to move simultaneously.[4] This design prioritized functional movement over ornamental complexity, enabling the puppets to maintain their theatrical presence despite their minimalist construction. His marionettes were featured in the Dimensions '87 exhibition, the Saskatchewan Craft Council's premier juried show, where they were noted for their "expressive carved features" and "articulated movement."[5]

Based in Chaben Place, Sladek's influence extended beyond Saskatoon. He became a fixture in the regional craft scene, frequently covered by the *Edmonton Journal* in the late 1980s and 1990s. Reports from the era highlight his unique ability to blend the "seriousness" of traditional European craft with a "never-ending sense of humor" that resonated with local audiences.[7] These clippings serve as the primary documentary evidence of his commercial success during his lifetime.



Dennis Listermann-Vierling holds Bishop and 19th Century Woman marionettes.



Magi with the Holy Family.

The New Bern Puppets Collection: A Living Archive

In the late 1990s, New Bern Puppets commissioned a significant ensemble from Sladek, resulting in a collection of over 25 figures created between 1999 and 2000.[7] This commission was unique in that it was not a series of individual sales but a cohesive repertory ensemble designed for narrative performance. The collection includes:

- **Biblical figures:** Jesus, Mary, Joseph, the Magi, and Shepherds
- **Authority figures:** King Herod, Roman Centurion, High Priest
- **Supporting characters:** Myrrhbearers, Angels, and 19th century historical figures

Unlike many private collections where marionettes are retired to display cases, New Bern Puppets adheres to Sladek's original intent: active performance. The collection is utilized annually for a Christmas Biblical performance, a practice that has continued since the collection's acquisition.[8] This approach ensures the mechanical systems remain lubricated and functional, and the characters retain their "theatrical presence."

Personal Legacy

Beyond his technical skill, Sladek was remembered by colleagues and family for his warmth and humor. His obituary notes that even in serious situations, he "always found something to laugh about," a trait that seemingly infused his puppets with a sense of vitality.[9] His personal life centered on his family, his cabin at Turtle Lake, and the joy of travel. He is survived by his wife, Louise, children, and grandchildren.

The story of Vaclav Sladek is a testament to the endurance of the artisan. In an era where digital archives are ephemeral, his legacy survives through the physical integrity of his puppets and the continued labor of the performers who bring them to life. As New Bern Puppets continues to stage performances with his work, Sladek's marionettes remain not as static relics, but as active participants in the ongoing history of puppetry.

Scan the QR code on page 3 for footnotes.