

CARNIVAL!

Program Notes

By Joshua S. Ritter, Education Director

“*Carnival!* - A Fairy Tale for Everyone!”

The origins of *Carnival!* can be traced to the classic television puppet show “Kukla, Fran and Ollie”. Burr Tillstrom manipulated a total of twelve puppets for a live and unscripted puppet show with Fran Allison as the only visible human cast member. Allison, a former teacher, had an uncanny rapport with the puppets and together they captivated audiences of all ages. The program was extremely popular and was enjoyed by more adults than children. “Kukla, Fran and Ollie” was widely regarded as the first children's show to strongly appeal to an older demographic. The show had a continuous run from 1947 to 1957 and Jim Henson declared, as he was inducted into the Radio and Television Hall of Fame, “*We all owe everything to Burr Tillstrom and Kukla, Fran and Ollie.*”

On October 28, 1950, *The Saturday Evening Post* ran a short story by Paul Gallico entitled “The Man Who Hated People” that was inspired by “Kukla, Fran, and Ollie.” It was about a successful television program called “The Peter and Panda Show.” The story follows Milly Maynard, a young woman hired to appear on the program. Her role is to be herself and engage in extemporaneous repartee with a number of puppets. Behind the scenes, Crake Villeridge, a misanthropic puppeteer who manipulates all the puppets, scolds her for the slightest error and drives her to consider leaving the program. He is also in love with Milly and uses the puppets to show her different aspects of his personality. Crake is ashamed of his physical appearance, but he says to Milly about himself: “If you could be made to love all of the things he really was, you would never again recoil from the things he seemed to be.”

Milly does come to love Crake and she resolves that “Her lot lay with the enchanted Never-Never Land of the mind, its children who had come to be a part of herself, and the man who was the creator and father to them all.”

The story received mixed reviews; however, Gallico used the basic premise of “The Man Who Hated People” to write the highly acclaimed novella *Love of Seven Dolls*. Gallico dedicated the book to Burr Tillstrom and Fran Allison of the “Kukla, Fran, and Ollie” show. He also invited Burr, Kukla, and Ollie to be in *Lili*, the movie version of the yet-to-be-published *Love of Seven Dolls* with Leslie Caron. However, they declined the offer and the movie went through production with different cast members.

There are some similarities between the book and the movie, although, major differences abound. The book is somber in tone, while Helen Deutsch’s screen interpretation is uplifting and heartwarmingly romantic. It is a film that has been enjoyed by people of all ages and *Carnival!* is based on the screen adaptation.

In *Love of Seven Dolls*, Gallico introduced the idea of a young woman joining a carnival, not a television program. This plot device is implemented in *Lili* and later in *Carnival!*. *Lili* went on to become an award-winning and phenomenally successful film. This caught the eye of producer David Merrick, who subsequently proposed a stage adaptation of the movie.

In 1958 Merrick commissioned screenwriter Helen Deutsch to draft a plot outline based on the screenplay of *Lili*. Deutsch suggested Bob Merrill write music and lyrics for the musical and Merrick agreed. Next, director and choreographer Gower Champion became involved after falling in love with Merrill’s music for the show. Champion’s vision required the exclusion of conventional scene changes and curtains. This concept pervaded every aspect of the show and brought a greater sense of cohesion to the piece. Champion also changed the title of the show from *Carrot Top* to *Carnival!*. Later, Michael Stewart completed the first draft of the book with Deutsch. Meanwhile, Bob Merrill was being pressured to write a hit song for the show. Then, in a moment of frustration, he remarkably improvised “Love Makes the World Go ‘Round.’”

After an exhaustive casting process, *Carnival!* went into production from January 9 to March 5, 1961. After out of town tryouts, *Carnival!* opened on Broadway at the Imperial Theatre on April 31, 1961 and ran for 719 performances. Even before the Broadway opening, rumors abounded that Merrick had a hit. Word had spread that the show benefited from first-rate direction, creative staging, an excellent score, and a fine cast. The critics lavished praise on the production, hailing it a “gentle blockbuster,” “ebullient rough-and-tumble merriment,” “restores wonder to theatre,” and “captures the quality of magic.” Many of the traditional elements found in fairy tales are reflected in *Carnival!*. Although, unlike most stories within that genre, adults are drawn to the characters in the musical as well! We are pleased to bring you a classic production that will ensure an enchanted and uplifting evening for the whole family.