

LIFE ON A STRING

The Journey of Two Puppeteers



Press Kit

University of Southern California Documentary

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Tagline

The Journey of Two Puppeteers

Logline

In the face of great sacrifice, two Los Angeles puppeteers refuse to give up their insatiable passion for their art.

Paragraph

All children are artists. The problem is how to remain an artist once he grows up.
—Picasso

Puppetry takes many forms all around the world, but they all share a common thread: animating the inanimate. Since ancient times, humans young and old have used puppets to tell stories and communicate our ideas and longings. The short documentary, *Life On a String*, peeks into the lives of two Los Angeles based puppeteers, Cain Carias and Gary Jones, who have dedicated their lives to their craft. Both men, Cain near the beginning of his career, Gary nearing its conclusion, seek validation and purpose in a world that seems to be leaving this ancient artform behind. As men of color, the two craftsmen yearn to use their art as a voice for their people. While they sometimes struggle to make the life of an artist work, they find humor, joy and ultimately peace when performing for an audience.

Full Synopsis

Life On a String pulls back the curtain on two Los Angeles based puppeteers of color, Cain Carias and Gary Jones, who have dedicated their lives to keeping an ancient artform alive. These charismatic performers have given over to what Gary calls the “Red and Gold Fever”—an uncanny “disease” that keeps artists going back to the theatre no matter the cost.

After turning down a job with the Jim Henson Company, Gary Jones founded his Blackstreet USA Puppet Theatre in Chicago in 1975, a remarkable company of all-black puppeteers. “What I started [was] a crusade to remind African American people that they are, indeed, just gorgeous. It’s still very much necessary.” Through 40+ years traveling the country and the world, Gary has delighted, entertained and educated audiences with his unique and lyrical performances, always with an intention toward highlighting the inner and outer beauty of African Americans. Now nearing the end of his career, Gary contemplates his legacy and his own future as a puppet artist. From a mildly-attended public performance in



Gary Jones · Blackstreet USA Puppet Theatre

LA, to a whirlwind tour in India, Gary's journey in the film reflects a life of overcoming challenges and experiencing unending possibilities. "Letting go and opening to something extraordinarily new is the right thing. Regardless of where I go ... the language of art is spoken everywhere. It's humbling that I have been given something that I can share, that I know is going to touch humanity."



Cain Carias is one of the last remaining puppeteers at Bob Baker Marionette Theatre to have been personally trained by Bob Baker himself—LA's late, beloved puppeteer. Coming to the United States at a young age, Cain grew up in an unfamiliar country. Raised with an absent father and a house full of siblings, he was forced to quit school to support his family. Bob

became a father-figure to Cain and shared with him his lifelong passion for puppetry. "Puppetry saved my life." Five years after Bob's death, Cain works to keep the legacy of Bob's theatre alive while struggling to come to terms with the return of his own father into his life. "I [considered Bob] like family. He was like a father figure that I never had before." Young and ambitious, Cain dedicates nearly every minute of his life to ensuring the Bob Baker Marionette Theatre will continue for generations to come, even as the downtown Los Angeles neighborhood it has called home for 50 years seems to be outgrowing it. Bob spent a lifetime building his puppets and his puppet theater is one of the most revered in the country. But Cain also has plans to expand its programming to be more representative of the Los Angeles community it serves. "[The] future for me is to continue here at the theater ... what I want to bring into it is ... Spanish [language] shows."

What begins as a story about the art of puppetry evolves into an examination of the lives of two extraordinary artists. Through intimate interviews with Gary and Cain and fly on the wall looks at the rehearsal and puppet-creation process through to final performances, the story turns an inspired eye toward the challenges of life as an artist. Illuminated through the stunning beauty of handcrafted puppets and a sweeping score that invokes both contemporary and classical moods, Cain and Gary remind all of us that dreams are worth pursuing, even when they may seem foolish and impossible. *What's at the end is up to you.*

Director's Statement

Life on a String was born out of the research I began for a different documentary. While seeking out West African immigrants in Los Angeles, I stumbled on Gary Jones' puppet studio at the Nate Holden Performing Art Center. I was fascinated with the puppeteer I met inside: a man who was full of passion, energy, and love for an ancient art. I kept coming back to talk to Gary because I wanted to understand what drove him to pursue what I considered a peculiar passion. Gary opened my eyes to the presence of puppetry in today's society and more research ultimately led me to check out the Bob Baker Marionette Theater where I met Cain. Cain truly enjoyed his art and I could tell that from the moment I saw him perform. Right away I was fascinated with this young, Latino puppeteer that was the only one smiling while performing. In Cain I saw someone who found hope and purpose in puppetry. Even though I previously had no interest in puppetry, I felt an immediate bond to these two men because I saw my own artistic journey in their passion and dedication.

Though *Life on a String* focuses on puppet artistry, it is a film made to inspire all artists and assure them that their work carries the ability to impact others. My hope is that this doc showcases the incredible benefits of art for people of color who are often marginalized and discluded. It shows how an African-American and a Latino puppeteer use art to fight the stereotypes placed on their communities. It's an example of how artists can't help but create in order to communicate and hide from the struggles around them.

To achieve the impact I desired, the filmmaking process had to be raw and on the fly. I spent several months getting to know Gary and Cain, learning who they were and what they loved. I wanted to make sure that when the crew was added to the picture, that I knew how each of these characters behaved so that we would move to their rhythm without disrupting their daily lives. As a director, it was important to me that the story followed the characters and felt like a slice of life, so I specifically filmed long takes in order to allow the subjects to forget we were filming as best as they could and let their lives unfold as authentically as possible.

In post production, we focused on discovering the arc of these characters in a way that would help audiences connect with them on a personal level. For editing we faced the challenge of telling the story of two very different people in very different places in their life. In the end, it was their shared unwavering passion for puppetry that tied them together. For sound, we explored the small intricacies present in marionettes and wand puppets, remaining subtle while creating distinct sounds for each of their locations. For the music, the composer was given the tremendous task of composing classical, jazz, and traditional film score for the picture. It was important that this wide array of different styles all feel like they belonged in the same world. These characters are eclectic and we wanted to make sure that was illustrated in the choice of music we composed for the film. The process of bringing *Life on a String* to the screen was truly a team collaboration from start to finish.



Gary Jones and Jonatas da Silva

Production Notes

A note from producer Jeffrey:

It was a rainy day in December in LA and I wanted nothing more to do than eat hot soup and be left alone. Enter David Hemphill. He invited me to lunch, said he was meeting someone about something vague and asked if I wanted to join him. We found ourselves ambushed into a pitch meeting to see if we wanted to produce *Life on a String* with Jonatas. If you'd asked me that day if I was going to make a documentary while at USC I'd have said absolutely no. If you'd asked me if I was going to make a documentary about ballerina puppets, I'd have laughed. I went through the lunch with David as quickly as I could.

Later that evening, Jonatas sent us a pitch video he'd made as part of the competition he won to have USC fund the project. I clicked play and found myself glued to my phone. Gary and Cain were dynamic and their puppets were like nothing I'd ever seen.

Still, there was no way I'd make a puppet documentary. David and I each wrote emails back to Jonatas passing on the project yet expressing our admiration for the subject and story.

A few days later I couldn't get the interview of Gary with Isaac, his first puppet, out of my head. I tried to ignore it until ... On the last day of the semester Jonatas emailed David and I a seven bullet point list detailing the reasons why he loved the project and despite all the practical considerations he thought we should reconsider. We cancelled our previously registered classes and signed up to produce *Life on a String*. Looking back, I can't believe we ever considered not being a part of this journey.

A little more from producer David:

Ha ha! Great note, Jeffrey.

The beginning of any production is pretty chaotic. Crew introductions, equipment testing, scheduling, rentals, location scouting all begins immediately. It was our first time producing a documentary and right away we began encountering challenges specific to the form like scheduling around our subjects and fluctuating locations. You can't force a subject to work a twelve hour day!



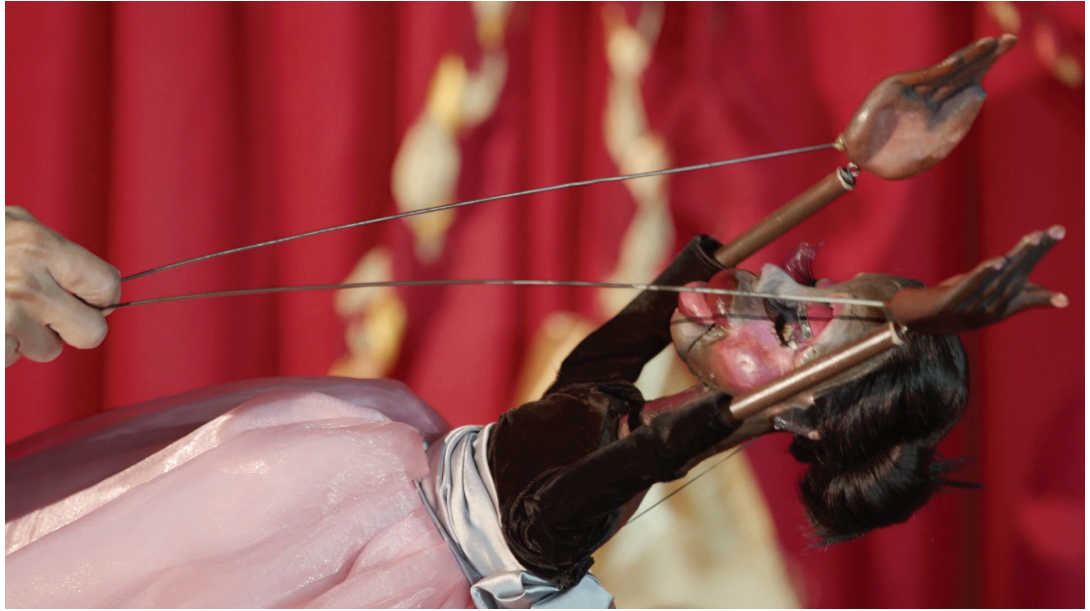
Jeffrey and I quickly learned each other's strengths and weaknesses and became an effective team. If I was overwhelmed with one aspect of the project, Jeffrey would seamlessly take the load of something else. It all just worked. We faced challenges as opportunities and, importantly, had a great time doing it. We shot 15 days over 3 months in a multitude of locations around Los Angeles. We scheduled dozens of meals, organized the schedules of over a dozen subjects and crew members and shuttled people and equipment from place to place to place, all while learning how to work with each other more and more efficiently and capably.

Early in the schedule we ran into a hiccup. Gary Jones was invited to perform in India for a month during our shooting schedule! This was great news for him, but tricky to coordinate since we were on a fixed schedule. We scrambled to see if we could somehow afford plane tickets for our crew. Sadly that was well over our budget. Instead we partnered with a talented DP, Saptarshi Roy, from Delhi to film a day of Gary's trip. The footage was so compelling it became the final scene.

This film and its message mean so much to us. As artists ourselves, we make the choice every day to pursue our own passion and live our own dreams. Just like Gary and Cain, it's the only thing we know how to do. And in the end, these two artists gave us even more reason to believe that it's all worth it.



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Crew Bios



Jonatas da Silva · Director

Jonatas da Silva is an African/Latino Filmmaker pursuing continual excellence in the production of fiction, documentary, and VR content. He received a Bachelors in Cinema & Television Production with a minor in Business from Regent University. Jonatas graduated Magna Cum Laude and went on pursue his MFA in Cinematic Arts from the University of Southern California. His films have been screened and awarded at multiple festivals including Best Student Film at the 2016 Worldfest Houston International Film Fest. He's currently developing a VR experience selected by the National Association of Latino Independent Producers as a semi-finalist for an industry grant and mentorship. Next, Jonatas plans to go into production for a documentary about West African street children.



David Hemphill · Producer

David Hemphill is a multi-faceted filmmaker from Miami, Florida where he received a BFA in Musical Theatre from New World School of the Arts. He is an award-winning actor, director, writer and producer telling stories in a variety of genres and forms. Prior to joining the USC family, David founded and worked as the Producing Artistic Director of the Project [theatre] (Miami's premiere immersive theater company) and Project [films] (in Los Angeles). He has performed as an actor on stage and screen from regional theater to network television, commercials and films. He is passionate about the role documentaries play in our narrative understanding of the world and loves educating and inspiring others. He is currently pursuing his MFA in directing and producing at USC's School of Cinematic Arts.



Jeffrey Simon · Producer

Jeffrey is a filmmaker from Chicago, Illinois. A series he's developing, *Camp Abercorn*, raised 100k on Indiegogo with help from GLAAD and George Takei and most recently was workshopped in the IFP Screen Forward Lab. Also a composer, his most recent short musical, SPARK, premiered at the Don Thompson Film Festival. Prior to attending USC, Jeffrey worked in the art department on films including *Spider-Man: Homecoming*, *Edge of Tomorrow*, and the upcoming *Venom*. A film he art directed, *Filly Brown*, premiered in competition at *Sundance*.



Bruce Hsin-Ta Chiu · Cinematographer

Born and raised in Taipei, Taiwan, Bruce is an experienced director and cinematographer for commercials, narrative films, and documentaries. He is interested in making films for social issues and believes that the power of storytelling can change the world. With a strong ambition to become a better filmmaker, he is currently studying film production at USC School of Cinematic Arts, focusing on directing and cinematography.



Jake Fadley · Production Sound & Design

At age 17, Jake watched the events of the 9/11 as a Senior in High School and shortly after enlisted in the US Navy. He served two deployments in Iraq as a Combat Camera Operator before returning home to go to college. But quickly found he missed being around the Military. Just like that he was off to Army boot camp and then trained as a Journalist shortly after. He deployed two more times with the National Guard, both back to Iraq and Afghanistan, while finishing his undergrad at Ohio University Scripps with a Bachelors of Science. It was during his second deployment to Afghanistan that he decided to leave the Military for good, and pursue a career in Film Making. Jake currently lives in LA with his wife, Kim Hill, where he attends the University of Southern California School of Cinematic Arts, as a graduate student.



Nicole L. Thompson · Production Sound & Design

Nicole L. Thompson is a filmmaker from Newark, New Jersey. She holds a Bachelor of Arts from The College of New Jersey. She also studied filmmaking at Northumbria University in England. Nicole began her career at SAG-AFTRA as the Digital Strategy & Production Coordinator. While at SAG-AFTRA Nicole filmed interviews of Kerry Washington, Carol Burnett and many more. She has directed several award winning short films. Currently she is studying directing at the University of Southern California where she is pursuing an MFA in Film & TV Production. Nicole proudly serves as the president of the USC African American Cinema Society.



Erin Offenhauser · Editor

Erin Offenhauser grew up in Minneapolis, Minnesota. She was lucky enough to know at a young age that she was interested in filmmaking. Her favorite movies are *Miss Congeniality* (2000), *Superstar* (1999) and *Rear Window* (1954). It wasn't until moving to attend UCSB that she found editing was her passion. Erin's dream is to work in international cinema so that she can combine her passions of travel and culture with filmmaking.



Mozhu Yan · Editor

Mozhu comes from China where she majored in Chinese Literature for her undergraduate education at Sichuan University. After attending an exchange program at Columbia University, she became determined to become a filmmaker in order to tell the stories that exist on paper and in her mind. Currently, she is a student at the University of Southern California, Film & Television Production MFA Program.

Credits

Featuring Cain Carias and Gary Jones
Directed by Jonatas da Silva
Produced by David Hemphill and Jeffrey D. Simon
Cinematography by Bruce Hsin-Ta Chiu
Edited by Erin Offenhauser Mozhu Yan
Production Sound & Design by Jake Fadley and Nicole L. Thompson
Original Music by Alex Robert Heinrich

Animation Joel Willman
Colorist Luke Sargent
Sound Mixing Jake Fadley and Nicole L. Thompson
Additional Photography Mary Gerretsen and Jonathan Miller
2nd Unit Photography (India) Saptarshi Roy and Abhinav Kakkar
Additional Sound Recordist John Zhao
Additional Music Arrangement by Rodolfo Iriarte Tórtima
Music Recorded by Daniel Blanck
SCA Business Affairs Reba Molock and Brenda Williamson
Still Photographer Sam Sikora
Transcriptions Kristin Muller Transcription Services
Translation Jose Cruz Berber
Vocals David Hemphill and Morgan Vinson
Musicians Jared Blajian, Jaimee Cao, Barry Fowler, Josh Ginsburg, Alex Robert Heinrich, Akane Hinamoto, Nao Kubota, Osmário Marinho, Sydney Mariano, Sophie Mathieu and Shelby Wong

Documentary Faculty
Directing Amanda Pope
Producing Lisa Leeman
Cinematography James O'Keeffe
Editing Kate Amend, ACE
Sound Richard Burton
Avid Instruction Jeremy Deneau
Story Development Doe Mayer

Graduate Assistants Hao Chen, Mary Gerretsen, Eric Han and Emily Kalish

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The production team would like to thank:

Bob Baker Marionette Theater

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Nate Holden Theater

Wren T. Brown, Gayle Hooks, Rosa King, Anuradha Sharma and Alice Williams

Cain's Family

David Carias, Jorge Carias, Noe Carias, Stephanie Carias, Yulissa Carias, Abel Contreras, Lety Contreras, Emily Posada, Faith Posada, Angel Robles, Miguel Robles

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Ain't We Got Fun

Music by Richard A. Whiting

Lyrics by Raymond B. Egan and Gus Kahn

Arrangement by Alex Robert Heinrich

Performed by Morgan Vinson

Don Quixote, "Pas de Deux"

Music by: Ludwig Minkus

Arrangement by Rodolfo Iriarte Tórtima

La Bayadère, "Entrance of the Shades"

Music by: Ludwig Minkus

Arrangement by Rodolfo Iriarte Tórtima

Archival Materials

Photography of Carias Family courtesy Yulissa Carias

"Eyewitness News" WLS-TV Chicago, ABC

"Go Tell It" NBC

"Channel 2: The People" WCBS Chicago

Photography of Bob Baker provided by the Bob Baker Marionette Theater

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