

Los Angeles Times

A tale of a Los Angeles puppet master

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By Joelle Estelle Mendoza



Puppeteering for over 20 years, Cain Carias has performed throughout Los Angeles County —

at community centers, parks, concerts, schools, quinceañeras and even events like L.A.'s dance party Scam and Jam. His followers tag him on social media with selfies featuring his marionette puppets, along with makeup and tribute tattoos all inspired by Carias' puppet El Triste.

At a summer backyard party in East L.A., El Triste, La Smiley and Mister E, all marionettes created by Carias, trot through the back alley — slow and low, in their custom glimmering shades of metallic blue along with their pet Cerberus, a mythical three-headed guard dog. Carias captivates the crowd, maneuvering the marionettes so they sway to oldies on the driveway dance floor.

El Triste swoons the homegirls with a flirty wave while singing along to Los Yesterdays' "Nobody's Clown." Mister E raps "Hot Foos Summer," while Carias casts a surreal spell throughout the summer night. It seems as if the puppets are really dancing, mingling and chilling. The crowd's demeanor shifts and rises while watching the puppets move throughout the party. Carias claims El Triste is the saddest puppet in Los Angeles, yet acknowledges how happy he makes everyone.

Carias migrated from Tijuana with his Guatemalan family, seeking asylum in the U.S. when he was 13 years old. Being the oldest sibling of six, Carias needed to work to help support his family, especially after his father was deported back to Guatemala. When a neighbor said a local theater was hiring, he enthusiastically followed up.

"I thought I was gonna work at a movie theater, and I thought that meant free movies."
"Then, I walked into the Bob Baker Theater and I was like: 'Woah, what is this?'"

Carias had never seen a puppet show before when he walked into the theater during a Halloween show. The vampires, glow-in-the-dark skeletons and witch marionettes tripped him out in "the best way."

He credits his mentor, Baker, and the theater for keeping him out of neighborhood gang life and crime. "I never got caught up, and if I ever did, they would have sent me back, and I know it's because I was involved in the theater," he says.

Carias felt like he was living in two worlds, he said. In one, he went to school, dealt with a rough neighborhood and helped his mom raise his five siblings. In the other, he was a master puppeteer, someone who had people staying after the show just to shake his hand.



Cain Carias, also known as PuppetMaster213, proudly claims to be Tijuana BORNXRaised and "California Dreamin' and Los Angeles Livin,'" more specifically reppin' Westlake and MacArthur Park.

"In one world, I felt like a nobody, and at the theater, I was somebody," he says.

The Bob Baker Marionette Theater is the oldest puppet theater in the country. In 2009, it was recognized as a Los Angeles Historic-Cultural Monument. The original theater was just blocks away from Carias' family home in Echo Park. Carias began working there while he was in eighth grade and was paid as a contractor."

"Bob didn't speak Spanish, and I didn't speak English when I first started working there, but we still communicated," Carias said. Through gestures and miming, Carias learned how to become a puppeteer.

"I began with lighting at the theater, and through that, I was able to watch, study and understand the whole world of the show." After five years of lighting, fixing puppets and receiving mentoring from Baker, Carias was able to perform in shows and quickly became an advanced puppeteer, working with the most popular puppets. "I love when I am working the puppets so good that the audience doesn't even notice me or the strings," he said. Creating that kind of awe and joy for his audiences is why he's continued puppeteering for over 20 years.

Carias said he was teased growing up for working at the theater. But Carias didn't care because **he loved going to work.** "Work didn't feel like work. I made people smile." He would often perform for over 100 children a day.

"I think performing for all those kids and making them smile transferred energy back to me and I absorbed all that joy." All the teasing couldn't deter Carias from continuing his passion and he is grateful to have worked with Baker before he died in 2014. On the tops of Carias' hands are tattooed marionette controls; on his right hand Baker's name is inscribed as a tribute. "Bob Baker puppeteered till he died at 90, and I know I will be doing this my whole life too," Carias said. "This tattoo is a reminder of that."

After spending years working and performing at the theater, Carias decided to build his own puppet, one that represented his community and his obsession with clowns. Carias collaborated with Monserrat Reyes, who makes custom, gangster-inspired dolls called Lil' G Dolls. Carias' design was inspired by Rob Zombie's Captain Spaulding character and the iconic Mexican clown Cepillín. Carias named his first puppet El Triste, because he wanted it to serve as his alter ego, the opposite of his own positive and happy personality.



2025 Turkey Trot 5K
Homeboys Industries

After taking El Triste on the bus with him, Carias witnessed the power of having puppets occupy the "outside world." Having a puppet that looked like a member of his community allowed people to engage with excitement, and soon El Triste was getting event requests, appearing in music videos and being invited to car shows.

When Carias was asked how his marionettes were different than Baker's, he explained: "The puppets at the theater are over 50 years old and never change. Same clothes. Same look on their faces. Same performance. They stay the same forever. El Triste has different outfits. He has a car. Now, he has a slick back, [he used to be bald] and has a girlfriend, La Smiley."

For Carias, his puppets are more than objects used for storytelling. They *are* the story, and he is following their lead. To operate as a femme puppet, Carias explains that the puppeteer needs to evoke feminine energy. And even though that was challenging for him, he decided to create a girlfriend because El Triste was “lonely.”

“My puppets are part of Los Angeles. They are Los Angeles,” explains Carias. While he hopes to continue to expand El Triste and La Smiley’s family, he also hopes to expand their circle of homie puppets, and even create a puppet car club.

Impressed with King Foo, the pseudonymous creator behind Foos Gone Wild, Carias appreciated that Foos Gone Wild humanized cholos and made them “less ‘scary.’” Similarly, Carias does the same with his cholo puppets. Growing up, he was targeted because of how he dressed. Carias built a mini Mister E as a tribute to Foos Gone Wild.

To further combat stereotypes and cultural assumptions, Carias is using his “cholo puppetry” to participate in positive community outreach, which includes supporting street vendors, along with cultural and art engagement in the community.

Most people think that puppetry is a skill to learn, but Carias feels that he has learned from his puppets. “El Triste, has taught me life doesn’t stop for nobody and it definitely isn’t going to stop for a puppet — he helps me to move forward,” he said. “If I didn’t build El Triste, I would still be stuck in one spot. Without puppets in my life, none of the things that I am doing right now would exist. He [El Triste] is opening my doors that I couldn’t. I’m an immigrant, and El Triste was born here. Things I could not do he is actually doing it for me. All the places I couldn’t go or didn’t know existed, he is taking me.”

Cain Carias illustrates the power of art and how discipline within an artistic practice can pave opportunities beyond what is thought possible.



El Triste and La Smiley

Find Cain on Instagram

<https://www.instagram.com/puppetmaster213/>

Los Yesterdays Nobody’s clown

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=VvJTEct-gUw>



Cain and El Triste at the 2025 Echo Park Community Parade with members of the Belmont High School marching band



Puppet Masters
Unique clothing
and accessories
inspired by L.A.'s
famous puppet
duo El Triste and
La Smiley

2025
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