

California Raisin Raisin Puppets: Late 80's - Early 90's

Written by Marc Spess

Sunday, 18 April 2010 20:02 - Last Updated Monday, 16 May 2011 04:43



Above are the remains of four original clay puppet California Raisins from the TV special called Raisins Sold Out. We got them in the mail from Webster Colcord who used to work at Will Vinton Studios, and said that these clay puppets were all headed for the garbage. So he took them and had them in a box for many years. The puppets are probably around 11-13 years old and in seriously bad shape. There are also armature parts from a few different characters. On the top right you can see what they originally looked like before they were mangled.



The heights varied from puppet to puppet. Molds were made on original Gary "Gairy" Bialke sculptures out of cold cast casting rubber so many duplicates of the four characters could be reproduced. We added in different colors to show what the height might have been before the raisins were smashed.

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One thing we learned was that they used 1/2 inch hex cap head machine screws to secure the puppets to the set floors. They would first drill a hole in the wood floor, and screw the hex screw down to pull down on the feet. You can see on the top left why this would save a puppet from getting ruined using a phillips head wood screw and screw driver. The allen wrench on the top right is angled away from the puppet, and when you turn it you wont hit the sculpted areas.

Webster Update: We did often use regular short wood screws for screwing the feet down, and we were always knocking the screwdriver into the characters, stupid, huh? Eventually we found a right-angle philips screwdriver, a goofy looking thing that didn't work very well, I've still got one and I could send you a pic of it sometime. Tony Merithew and some other folks started using the hex screw because of all the reasons mentioned.



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Above you can see the more complex armature for Stretch. It involve taking a piece of wood and drilling a hole in the middle of it. Then a round piece of brass plate stock had a short piece of brass dowel rod soldered to it. When it was inserted into the hole of the wood, the lower body could swivel.

Above you see how the legs plugged into the lower part of Stretch. We also found out that the eyes were made of super sculpey hardening clay and painted with a white paint.

What a surprise - A.C.'s head was missing because someone placed plastic wrap in the middle of the sculpture. We think the animator did this in order to allow the head to twist. Since the puppets were made of such thick clay, bending a head to change it's position must have been very hard to do. Plastic would allow the two parts to slide on each other. This gave us an idea that you could place plastic wrap at the back of the mouth which uses black clay to make it look like the mouth is very deep. You would not have to worry about the colors mixing during animation. They didn't do this though for Red as you can see on the right.

Webster Update: Tony Merrithew and Teresa Drilling perfected this technique. The molds that we cast the hot clay in were flexible urethane, and later silicone. We would spray some silicone mold release in there and pour hot clay, put them in the freezer and pop them out later. The only problem with this technique is that the texture of the clay would change with the heating and cooling. I think that is why Aardman uses "press-molds".

The teeth of these puppets used a combination of Van Aken clay and bees wax to make the teeth harder. When animating a mouth, the teeth would get hit with a sculpting tool and would not need repairing.

Webster Update: The teeth didn't contain beeswax, but sometimes they were made of a wax called Pongo, and sometimes the hands were a mixture of Van Aken, Pongo, and some other wax to get a particular shade of off-white.



Above you can see more parts that go into unknown animated raisin puppets. We found out they probably used 2 by 2's for the wooden mid sections. The ends were rounded most likely using a band saw, and a belt sander. They may have also found dowels from a specialty wood

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supplier that had the basic shape.

UPDATE Webster added a few more things that we thought were important to the process of making the raisins. I asked Webster a question about how they got those huge chunks of wood inside the mold without problems.

Marc: Do you have any idea how you got the clay to wrap around the armature parts without huge air pockets forming? Or did you slice the cast clay pieces and dig out the innards for the armatures?

Webster: We only cast the front half of the characters, the face side, so air pockets were never an issue. We would just sculpt the back half. The mold would sit flat on the table, face down, open side up, and the armature would fit in the back, you would then just pour the clay in around and on top of it. It was really simple.