



Cabaret Mechanical Theater—a history

The Cabaret began as a shop in Falmouth, Cornwall, presided over by the restless spirit of Sue Jackson who, wishing to move on from a successful restaurant business, thought she'd give retail a whirl for a few years. This was in the late seventies when people from the sixties had tired of the endless partying and settled down to become goatherds and self-employed artisans. The shop was full of their products; pottery, knitted goods, woodwork, quilts, toys. It was cheerful, quirky and, because Sue knew Ron Fuller and Peter Markey, some of it moved when you turned a handle. Pretty soon the mechanical things predominated over the stuff that just sat there doing nothing and other mechanically-minded artisans saw a chance to sell their products. Paul Spooner was in this second wave and the place began to get a reputation as somewhere to go if you wanted to buy 'automata'. Many people didn't want to buy; they just wanted to look, so Sue roped off a section of the place as if it were a tiny museum and made people pay to look. Money was also extracted from them by home-made slot machines, of which Tim Hunkin is a past and current master.

Sue didn't like the way Falmouth, a seaside town, tended to shut down in the winter and in 1984 moved her enterprise to the then-fashionable Covent Garden in London. Lots of people visited, then other makers: Keith Newstead, Carlos Zapata, Andy Hazell, Lucy Casson etc. added their pieces to the show. Outreach projects: the automata competitions for schools, publications, kits and collaborative efforts were instituted. Among the many visitors to the renamed Cabaret Mechanical Theatre, Design and Technology teachers were particularly keen, and incorporated automaton design into their courses. Many people who have passed through the British educational system will have constructed some jolly mechanism of their own; a surprising number of them electing to make cows jump over moons!

The Covent Garden premises closed in 2000 but its spores have spread. Several versions of the collection are to be seen in exhibitions around the world. There is a web site and on-line shop selling educational materials and examples of automata to suit every pocket (except the almost-empty).

Strictly speaking, Cabaret is a business. Still run by Sue Jackson and her daughter Sarah Alexander, it sells goods and services to a rather specialised clientele. It is also a collection of people who enjoy each others' company, those who make, sell and buy automata as well as those who just like to look. Photos at left and right show interior of the gallery; large figure at entrance, requesting 50 p entrance fee, is the Pink Policeman, by Ron Fuller.

