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Column: JON CARROLL

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I've been serving on the board of Children's Fairyland for just over a year now, and oh what fun it has been, insofar as "serving on boards" can be said to be an amusing recreational activity. Once we got corn dogs; I feel more board meetings should have corn dogs.

If you don't know, Children's Fairyland is an amusement park for young children on the banks of Oakland's Lake Merritt. It's venerable -- it's older than Disneyland -- and for a long time it was in decline, undermaintained and underpromoted. Then new management came in -- her name is C.J. Hirschfield, and she's a pistol -- and exciting new board members were brought in too. I'm not one of them, but I got to meet some.

All sorts of problems had to be addressed. There was deferred maintenance up the wazoo -- never a place where you want to have your deferred maintenance -- and the staff was getting paid in cookies and fairy dust, and some of the attractions were looking pretty shabby. It was a "didn't that used to be a nice park" sort of place. Even Coco the Pony looked sad.

I love Coco the Pony. Alice loves Coco the Pony. Coco is about 870 years old now, and he candidly does not have much of a personality, but he's a babe magnet. God only knows what will happen when Coco shuffles off this mortal coil, but I am prepared to wear a pony suit every other Saturday. I mean, if it would help.

I should say that I don't get a dime for serving on this board; in fact, it costs me money, since board members are encouraged to donate. Strongly encouraged. If you don't donate, an elf comes and sits in your living room. I just want to be clear that I have no conflict of interest in writing about Children's Fairyland. I mean, it's a Fairyland. That's just not where the bucks are.

(One of the attractions at Children's Fairyland is called the Jolly Trolley. I know the second word is misspelled, but -- I dunno, maybe trolls were involved once. One of the cool things about the Jolly -- shudder -- Trolley is that, since it's a real working train, people from official state agencies have to walk the tracks just as they do with the big trains, inspecting for, you know, bad stuff. They're serious matters, marred only by the Rock-a-Bye Baby gyrating madly in a nearby treetop.)

The board meetings are held in a small conference room. When the entire board meets, there is not room at the table for everyone. It's festival seating. And we have to keep the

door closed because we are discussing matters of great moment, and if the repurposing the pumpkin rumor should ever leak out -- hell to pay.

So in the small room with all the respiring humans and the door closed, it gets hot. One might get a tad sleepy in the hot room. Now, I am as interested in "compensated absences payable" and "leasehold improvements" as the next fellow, but I read the budget before I got to the meeting and now we're going over it again, and I do not have opinions on every issue. When someone begins talking "three years out," I begin thinking about "tonight's dinner in."

Above the conference table are two marionettes. I don't mind marionettes in context, that is, onstage, animated by humans moving their strings, re-enacting gentle stories of revenge and madness. And I don't mind hand puppets at all -- in fact, I can even make a hand puppet myself using only my hand. My thumb is the lower jaw and my fingers are the rest of the face, and I can make it talk. "Hello, boys and girls!" See, that's stupid, but it's not ominous.

But the marionettes are just hanging there. They are human figures, and they are hanging. Does that posture not suggest the sudden justice of the Old West? Also, marionettes can get their strings tangled very easily, which means they look a little like, what's the phrase, dismembered corpses. I suppose if the word "amortize" weren't being mentioned quite so much, I might not brood about the marionettes.

See, here's the thing about the magic of childhood -- it's pretty darned weird. Childhood is pretty darned weird too. Imaginary beings, acts of magic both good and bad, pigs with inadequate construction skills, Captain Hook, witches who eat children, even a lamb with serious boundary issues. Stare at a marionette long enough, and the whole world seems twisted.

Oh good, the board is talking about the cafe now. Perhaps a corn dog will appear, that is to say, a dead pig wrapped in an oversubsidized agricultural product.