

Vess' journey has taken him from crayons to Hollywood

Drawing with crayons on the wall was Charles Vess' first creative effort. "As soon as I could grab a crayon in my chubby little fingers, I crawled to the nearest wall and began to draw. And still today, creating an image on a sheet of paper continues to make me very happy indeed. I don't use crayons very often any more though," Vess says.

Vess has long since graduated from the simplicity of a box of children's colors. In 1978, he began creating freelance work for National Lampoon, Heavy Metal, Epic Illustrated and Marvel and DC Comics.

"In 1987, my life changed when I met Karen Shaffer from Bristol, Virginia, who was also living on the West Side. We left New York City one year later and got married."

In 1990 a graphic novel that Vess wrote, drew and painted for DC Comics, "Spider-Man, Spirits of the Earth," was released. Within a month, "Sandman #19" (written by series creator Neil Gaiman and illustrated by Vess) went on to win many comic industry awards and is still the only comic book to win a World Fantasy Award for Best Short Story.

"Spider-Man, Spirits of the Earth" had a significant effect on the art scene in this region. It got Vess and Shaffer back to Shaffer's home.

"We moved to the Bristol/Abingdon area and purchased a farmhouse in the country with the proceeds from 'Spider-Man.' Later, Karen and I both signed on at the fledgling William King Regional Arts Center in different capacities," he says.

Vess' first exhibit at William King wasn't just as an artist but also as a curator. "Dreamweavers" was an exhibition of 13 contemporary mythic artists (including Vess), which traveled the country for a year after its opening at William King. His latest exhibit at William King was "Into the Green: The Art of Charles Vess," which included a gallery-wide mural.

In 1997, he and Gaiman created "Stardust, A Romance Within the Realms of Faerie" containing 175 of Vess' illustrations. Ten years later, a film adaptation of the book "Stardust" was produced. It starred Michelle Pfeiffer, Claire Danes and Robert DeNiro and proved to be a witty, emotional adventure that had the very pleasant effect of making my book sell many, many copies," Vess says.

Vess also lends his talents to other arts organizations in the region. He's created posters for Bristol Rhythm & Roots Reunion and Theatre Bristol. He helped organize and create a community-made mural of fantasy figures at Abingdon Cinemall in Abingdon. He created artwork for the teen area of the Washington County Public Library in Abingdon.

He also encourages the arts in young people. "I think that education in the arts is extremely important for everyone because it actively teaches us how to problem-solve with no given map or scorecard. Then too, studying about the arts and the artists that make it will give us a better understanding and sympathy for points of view. There are no boundaries in art," he says.

Richard Rose says, "Charles has certainly made an indelible mark on the artistic legacy of Barter Theatre, the State Theatre of Virginia. In 1992, shortly after I came to Barter as its third producing artistic director, I asked Charles to design a new logo for the theatre. Bold, clean and stylized, his logo has resulted in a rare form of graphic success: it is recognized as the definitive symbol of Barter Theatre and, as a practical matter, is very easy to use in our branding.

"During my first season at Barter, Charles designed the posters for every production as well as the covers of the souvenir programs. In 1994 and 2008, he created designs for the sets and props for 'Peter Pan,' a large musical performed in Barter's 507-seat venue. Charles proved to be a fast learner in production design, creating scenery and props that brought the fantasy to life while being able to withstand the heavy use of a long run. Because I wanted Neverland set in Appalachia, Charles's designs of that physical world had to be simultaneously familiar and strange to our audiences. He created a world that made you want to go there, using a magnificent scale that did not overwhelm the actors. I could not have asked for a more creative, thorough, caring collaborator. He paid attention to every detail, down to the mushroom stools he designed for characters. Further, he had his renderings of the set converted to prints and sold them as a fundraiser for Barter.

"His most enduring work for Barter thus far is the large bronze sculptural fountain he designed as a focal point between Barter's two venues. 'Titania's Fountain,' drawn from Charles' familiar-



Charles Vess has won three World Fantasy Awards for his art.

ity with 'A Midsummer Night's Dream,' measures 16 feet high, is 15 feet in circumference and weighs 800 pounds. Its scale is monumental, graceful and whimsical, an astounding artistic feat. The sculpture took three years to complete and stands on a prominent corner in Abingdon's downtown historic district, serving as a focal point for Barter guests and a prime photo stop for tourists to the area. Children and adults circle the fountain, sharing in the discovery of fairies and woodland animals tucked into the design."

Vess got a bit more involved in the creation of "Titania's Fountain" than he originally intended. "At first I thought that I would only be responsible for that initial design and maybe help a bit with the actual sculpting. But an intensive three-year period followed where most of the hands-on sculpting of the project fell to me. Then I helped pour the bronze and directed the welding of the hundreds and hundreds of metal pieces that eventually comprised the figures of Titania, Puck and their assorted friends.

"For the past four years I've worked in collaboration with award-winning writer Ursula K. Le Guin as I

attempted to slip into her very active mind and illustrate all six of her 'Earthsea' novels. It was recently completed with 54 color and black & white illustrations. Sadly, just as I was finishing up the last of my work on the project, I was informed that she had passed away. My last e-mail, received two days before her death, was a comment on one of my color paintings simply saying, 'Zowie!'

"I've been happy and productive making my living from the art that I created for over 40 years. Now, in my mid-60s, my studio is filled with books that feature my art, and its walls are hung with yet more images that are for my own personal pleasure. Most of my work concerns itself with narrative impulse and the stories that find their origin in folk and faerie tales told the world over. These are the building blocks for all our lives.

"I'm flattered to be given this award. It is always a pleasure to be recognized by one's peers and one's community. I love the people here and the landscape that surrounds us. Now let's take care of it a bit better, shall we?" he says. *A!*