

Tips for Operating Puppets

Puppetry is the art of giving voice and movement to inanimate objects – bringing them to life.

Puppet animation

MOUTH/SPEECH: Puppet mouths are similar to human mouths. The head doesn't move up while speaking - the lower jaw moves down. Do this by moving your thumb downwards inside the lower jaw of the puppet. Most importantly, OPEN the mouth on the syllables. Otherwise it looks like the puppet is eating the words. This is counterintuitive, so practice until it comes naturally.

EYES/FOCUS: Make the puppet's eyes look at the audience, not at the ceiling or elsewhere. One puppet speaking to another should still face the audience, *then* turn to the other puppet. If the puppeteer is in view of the audience, the puppet should look at the audience while speaking, *then* turn to the puppeteer. Also, when a puppet is speaking, the puppeteer should look at the puppet.

PERSONALITY/EMOTIONS:

As humans, we can roll our eyes, frown, and smile to show our feelings. Puppets, by construction, can't do this. Personality traits need to be magnified. For example, a sneaky puppet can be extra sneaky, a crying puppet can weep and wail. Draw upon body movements to express emotion. Practice by standing in front of a mirror, try to express emotions without a puppet, then translate the movements to the puppet. Here are some suggestions:

Glee: hold up the puppet's arms

Sadness: hunch the puppet forward

Fear: slightly vibrate the puppet

Disbelief: tilt the puppet's head

Thinking: hold puppet's hand on its chin

Surprise: have puppet do a double-take

Pause and a slow turn to the audience: can show the puppet's exasperation or be used for comedic effect

Hesitation: sometimes plays as well as a spoken line

Walking or running: bounce the puppet slightly up and down to represent each step.

Dancing: use the whole arm

Storytelling and Staging

Approach children gently with puppets. If a child is scared or shy, move the puppet's focus away. To make the puppet more approachable, have it mirror a child's shyness.

An instant way to utilize puppets is with Narrative Pantomime. The narrator/s just read, even voicing for the puppets, while puppeteers react to the storyline in pantomime with their puppets.

Simple puppet stages include turning a table over on its side, or draping a sheet over a rope tied between chairs. However, think beyond the traditional puppet stage. Have the puppeteers work puppets while in full view of the audience. Professional performances using this technique include Disneyworld's "Nemo, the Musical," and Broadway's "Warhorse." The puppeteers fade into the background, allowing the audience "suspension of disbelief."

Not everyone has to have a puppet. Puppets can be "supporting actors" and interact with real people on stage, as in "Sesame Street." Neither does everyone have to have a speaking part. Students can be trees, clouds, perhaps even a door. They are still actors.