

puppetry basics

PUPPET DEFINITION: anything you can pick up and bring to life

PUPPET MANTRA: it is a character, it is not a prop!

warm up your voice, body and your mind before every rehearsal and performance

transfer of energy: it's about your puppet, not YOU! There's NO ROOM FOR EGO in effective puppetry.

floor: KEEP A LEVEL ONE!

- establish a level floor based on comfortable elbow height
- make sure you can maintain this through various walks/modes of movement
- feel the weight and gravity as you settle, move, stand

focus: ALWAYS BE CONCERNED WITH WHERE THE PUPPET AND PUPPETEER ARE LOOKING!

note: a puppeteer's focus should always be on the puppet unless specifically directed otherwise as an overall artistic choice for the show—this is often called OVERT puppetry--see "transfer of energy" above as a related tip

- tendency is to let eyes drift HIGH—practice pointing fingers *down* at audience so the puppet's point of focus can be seen
- look, then speak/move: be clean and specific
- eye contact is as important in puppetry as in non-puppet acting!

ambient movement: YOUR PUPPET IS ALIVE EVEN WHEN NOT TALKING

- BREATH is the key to life in puppetry
- acting is REacting! Be present, listen, nod, be aware.
- you can communicate through silence. Puppetry is, first and foremost, a VISUAL artform.
- control your puppet so it doesn't control you: relax, slow down the tempo when in neutral. attention, not tension!

lip sync: DON'T FLIP YOUR LID! (for hand-in-mouth puppets)

- try to move just your thumb so it's your chin that's doing the moving
- for glove, object, shadow, rod (non-moving-mouth puppets), use small head (or body) movements to accent important words.** don't move too much, it's about MEANINGFUL movement—we don't move our heads with every sound/syllable, and neither should your puppet!

voice: BE CONSISTENT!

- not every puppet needs a voice—puppetry is a MOVEMENT art—show me, don't tell me!
- don't fall into a "puppet voice" trap: make it real! (it's not about a "funny voice," it's about a believable and sustainable one)
- practice catch phrase (first line) to get you into it
- clarity is the first concern!

Five Types of Puppets / Puppetry Styles

SHADOW PUPPET: a cut-out figure held between a source of light and a screen or projection surface. Shadow puppets can be solid silhouettes or be decorated with various amounts of cut-out details. Color can be introduced into cut-out shapes to provide a different dimension and different effects can be achieved by moving the puppet (or light source) out of focus. Closer = sharper and smaller, farther away = larger and more blurry. Examples can be found all over the world, but some of the oldest can be found in China (where, traditionally and superstitiously, heads of puppets have to be removed at night so the puppets don't "come to life"). The first shadow puppet performance on record is perhaps traced back to China —600 BCE—when advisors to Emperor Wu presented scenes that represented political advice from a departed loved one.

HAND PUPPET: a puppet that fits over the hand and is operated by the user's thumb and fingers. The most basic hand puppet, the glove puppet, has been used in cultures all over the world. The ones that we use in the United States (e.g. popularized in the television show "Mister Rogers' Neighborhood") are most likely inspired by English glove puppets that rose in popularity in England in the 1600's, Punch and Judy characters that entertained theatre-goers as they waited to attend Shakespeare's plays at the Globe (a way of spreading news and politics, too—shows changed every day). The hand puppet that's called a mouth (or hand-in-mouth, moving mouth or "Muppet style") puppet was made famous by Jim Henson and the Muppets/Sesame Street and is the predominant puppetry style in the United States.

STRING PUPPET: also called a "marionette"(loosely translated as "little Mary"). A puppet controlled by strings. One of the earliest marionettes in performance on record was Mary from Nazareth, an important figure in some religious traditions (hence "marionette"). Marionettes came to the United States during the vaudeville days (early 1800s), probably brought over from/by European artists—this "variety" or cabaret style show is still popular today. Eastern European traditions (e.g. those of Czech Republic/Czechia, Austria) are particularly rich.

ROD PUPPET: a type of overhead (performed over one's head above a stage or playboard) puppet with wooden, metal, or bone rods that support and control the body, head and/or limbs of the puppet. The rod puppet has been known since ancient times in Java (Indonesia), China and Japan; it later became widespread in other countries. Perhaps the most-seen version is the Indonesian style called "wayang golek." The puppet master in wayang golek speaks all the roles, sings, narrates, works the puppets and directs the gamelan (orchestra).

BODY PUPPET: a puppet for which one or more performers are required to move the body and limbs. These types of puppets are usually designed to be part of a large spectacle, are often used in parades or festivals, and are at least the size of a human and often much larger! Examples can be found in the nightly parades at various Disney amusement parks around the world and onstage in the Broadway musical "The Lion King," and in ritual and tradition in countries in Africa (e.g. Nigeria's igbo ijele masquerade).

SOME GREAT PUPPETRY RESOURCES!

Website

- The World Encyclopedia of Puppetry Arts: <https://wepa.unima.org/en/>

Books

- Allison, Drew and Donald Devet: The Foam Book. A guide to designing and building your own polyfoam puppets, taking you step by step through the creative process (also available in DVD version).
- Baird, Bil: The Art of the Puppet. Out of print (1965, McMillan Press) but check it out at your local library or look at used book stores.
- Bell, John: Strings, Hands, Shadows: A Modern Puppet History. Examines the forces that have shaped today's puppet theater. Chapters include: An Introduction to Puppetry, European Puppets in the Old and New Worlds, Puppet Theaters of Asia, Innovations of Puppet Modernism, The Second Wave of Puppet Modernism, and From the Sixties Onward: Another Puppet Renaissance.
- Bernier, Matthew and Judith O'Hare (editors): Puppetry in Education and Therapy (Unlocking Doors to the Mind and Heart). A collection of essays by various authors/artists that highlight the uses of, reasons and resources for and impact of puppetry in applied education and therapeutic settings.
- Blumenthal, Eileen: Puppetry: A World History. An illustrated, in-depth book great about modern puppetry (including stage and screen) and its traditional inspirations in puppet history.
- Bradshaw, Richard. Richard Bradshaw's Guide to Shadow Puppets. Info about screens, light sources, shadow puppet design and puppet performance.
- Curell, David: Making (almost) Instant Puppets. Lots of designs across all puppet styles using low cost, no cost, and/or easily-obtained materials. Also check out other books by this author.
- Down, Mark: A Practical Guide to Puppetry. A comprehensive overview of puppetry that includes techniques, exercises, puppet designs, advice on auditions and creating your own work—and more!
- Hunter, Kurt. Kurt Hunter's Simple Little Book of Marionettes. The fundamentals of string puppet design, build and performance.
- Kreutinger, Adam: Puppetry 101: creating film + television style puppetry. Everything you need to know to get started as an on-camera puppeteer. Also GREAT basics for stage puppetry!
- Latshaw, George: The Complete Book of Puppetry. This book covers every aspect of puppetry from concept to performance: a brief history, construction techniques, exercises that help develop voice and movement, stage design, writing and adapting plays, directing, helpful hints on scheduling, and handling audience challenges gracefully are all included.
- Millar, Mervyn: Puppetry: How to Do It. Activities and exercises in/for puppetry manipulation for actors, performers, designers and directors. Appropriate for all ages and experience levels.
- Mominz, Laurence and Mark Levenson (editors): The Language of the Puppet. A collection of essays by some of the world's leading figures in the puppet theatre - puppeteers, directors, scholars and students. The essays are divided into five sections; From Nursery to Altar, Between Illusion and Reality, Japanese Puppetry: Bunraku and Beyond, The Folk Art Puppet.

Organizations

- **Center for Puppetry Arts**: www.puppet.org (the unofficial national USA center for puppetry)
- **Puppeteers of America**: 1-888-568-6235, membership@puppeteers.org, <http://www.puppeteers.org> (local puppetry guilds, festivals, workshops, resources, bulletin board and more)
- **Union Internationale de la Marionnette (UNIMA)**: 404-873-3089, unima@mindspring.com, <http://www.unima-usa.org> (puppetry yellow pages, resources, scholarships, events and more)

SOME GREAT ADVANCED LEARNING (TRAINING AND EDUCATION) OPPORTUNITIES IN PUPPETRY

NOTE: please check program links for updated information! All is correct at the time this document was created and info is checked for accuracy regularly, but things are, of course, subject to change.

***Puppetry Festivals (regional and national) through/with the Puppeteers of America
(www.puppeteers.org) and:***

Beyond the Sock: Puppetry for Television and Film

- week-long workshop in design, construction, and performance techniques of "hand and rod" style puppets
- with support from University of North Texas
- Denton, TX

California Institute of the Arts (The Cotsen Center for Puppetry and the Arts at CalArts)

- Courses in Puppetry integrated into the Design & Production BFA degree program
- Valencia, CA

Center for Puppetry Arts Explore Puppetry Series

- Year-'round courses in puppetry that can be taken on-site in Atlanta, GA, or via Digital Learning

Center for Puppetry Arts Nancy Lohman Staub Puppetry Research Library

- Books, films, periodicals, journals, videos, DVDs, archives—available for viewing in the library by appointment only.

Heart of the Beast Puppet and Mask Theatre Workshops

- April/May puppet building workshops for MayDay Parade
- Minneapolis, MN

Movement Theatre Studio. NYC

- Contemporary Puppetry in Practice, Digital Puppetry, Shadow Puppetry
- course dates vary throughout year

National Puppetry Conference (c/o the Eugene O'Neill Center)

- 8-day (or longer if you include pre-conference activities) summer puppetry intensive in Waterford, CT

New England Puppet Intensive

- 2-week summer program in various locations in New England led by members of the Old Trout Puppet Workshop

(The) Ohio State University

- BA, BFA, MA, MFA, PhD degrees in Theatre Arts
- ability to personalize interdisciplinary degrees
- faculty members with puppetry backgrounds who regularly teach puppet classes (c/o Beth Kattleman)
- Columbus, OH

Sandglass Theater Summer Intensive Training in Puppetry

- 2-week intensive puppetry workshop led by Sandglass Theater puppet artists in Putney, VT

Sarah Lawrence College

- Undergraduate and graduate degrees in Theatre Arts
- Courses in Puppetry/Puppet Theatre
- Bronxville/Yonkers, NY

Toronto School of Puppetry

- Puppetry workshops, classes and intensives in Toronto, Ontario, Canada

University of California Santa Cruz

- BA, MA in Theater Arts
- Courses in Puppetry (c/o Kathy Foley)
- Santa Cruz, CA

University of Connecticut

- BFA, MA, MFA in Puppet Arts
- Puppet Arts Certificate (online program)
- Storrs, CT

University of Hawai'i at Manoa

- BA, MA, MFA, PhD in Performance, Design, Production, etc.
- Theatre for Young Audiences degree has strong puppetry emphasis
- Honolulu, Hawai'i

West Virginia University: College of Creative Arts

- BFA in Puppetry
- Morgantown, WV

INTERNSHIP / APPRENTICESHIP OPPORTUNITIES IN PUPPETRY

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[Center for Puppetry Arts internships](#)

Atlanta, GA

[Paperhand Puppet Project summer apprenticeship](#)

Saxapahaw, NC

[Puppet Showplace Theater Summer Internships](#)

Boston, MA

[What If Puppets Fabrication and Summer Teaching Artist internships](#)

Kansas City, MO