



3 Common Puppetry Mistakes to Avoid

By Tim Brown

I've had the privilege of observing well over a hundred puppet teams perform and have seen some great performances. Many, though, were mediocre at best. What makes the difference? Well, there are many reasons, but this article will focus on three common mistakes mediocre teams make, that if corrected can move them to becoming a great puppet team.

The number one goal in working a puppet is to make it appear as lifelike as possible. The more natural your puppets appear in manner and actions, the better quality your team will maintain. Below are three areas that if corrected will make your puppets appear more lifelike.

The Dreaded Quicksand Patches

Often when watching a puppet play, one or more puppets will slowly begin to sink as though they're caught in a quicksand patch. This happens when the puppeteer's arm gets tired or they aren't concentrating on their puppet.

I've seen plays where you can only see the puppets forehead while on stage. Other times, it looks like the puppet is riding in a boat with high waves. They slowly bob up and down during the entire performance. Others start with the puppet so high you can almost see the puppeteer's arm and end where you can barely see the puppet's mouth.

Not too long ago though, I saw a junior high team perform and what amazed me was every puppet started at the proper height and remained there the entire performance. If a junior high team can do it, the same is true for just about any puppet team.

There are two keys to maintaining proper height. The most important is to make sure your puppeteer's arms are strong enough to maintain consistent height. This is accomplished with weekly practices. The key is to not let the puppeteers slack off during practice. If they do, it will show up in performance.

The second key is that the puppeteers need to focus on their puppet as much as possible. If you're doing recorded plays, they should spend at least 90% of their time looking at their puppet; the other 10% looking at the puppets near them.

When a person stops looking at their puppet, they don't know if the puppet is at the proper height, leaning sideways, or bobbing. When you have the puppet at the proper height, make note of how much of the body is below the theater. Then keep scanning throughout the play to make sure that it remains there.

One more note. If you find your puppet has dropped too low, slowly bring it back to the proper height. If you just pop it up, it'll draw unwanted attention to that particular puppet.

The Frozen Arm

This mistake occurs when the puppet's arm is held out during most of the program. The puppeteer understands the importance of using the arm rods and makes a motion, but then leaves the arm outstretched as though it was frozen. I've seen plays where two or more puppets had their arms outstretched the entire time onstage.

The problem is it looks unnatural. People don't walk with their arm extended all day. They usually make a motion, drop their arm, later make another motion, drop their arm, etc. You should do the same with your puppet.

Before your program, attach rods to both arms. During the play, let the arms hang naturally until you decide to make a motion. At that point, pick up the rod, make the motion, and **drop it back down**. Do the same thing with the next motion and so on.

Many motions only use one arm, so alternate between the right and left. Use the right arm once or twice and then use the left. Don't just alternate left arm, right arm, left arm, right arm, etc. That becomes too predictable and doesn't look natural. People are predominately left or right handed so it's good to use one arm more in your motions. Watch how people use their hands and arms in normal conversation and then have your puppet copy them. Your puppet will be more lifelike and the program quality will increase.

What Are You Looking At?

When two puppets talk, they should look at each other, not the audience. I've seen plays where a puppet looks at the audience, off to one side, or up in the air while talking to another puppet. It's ok to glance around, but the focus should be on who you're talking to.

When you watch a TV program, notice the characters. How often do they look at the studio audience? They don't. They focus on the one they're talking with. Imagine watching a sitcom where the actors all look at the audience instead of each other. Would you watch it?

Sometimes lack of eye contact is from tired arms. As a puppeteer's arm tires, they tend to lose focus on the puppet and put their effort into keeping their arm up. Other times, it is simply inattention to the puppet. These are the same two problems addressed before.

Sometimes the puppet's position makes it difficult to keep eye contact with another puppet. In your practice time, it's a good idea to position puppeteers so the puppets can maintain proper eye contact. A left-handed puppeteer working a puppet on the right side of the stage will have a hard time looking to the left. The same is true for a right-handed puppeteer working on the left side of the stage.

There are times when the puppet will look at the audience, but those are usually during songs or parts in the play where the audience is recognized. Where do your puppets look when they talk? Looking in the right places adds to the professionalism and impact that your team makes

Here are three things to work on that can help your puppets look more lifelike and increase the professionalism in your presentations. Apply them and see what happens!