



3 Key Elements to Improve Your Puppetry Skills

By Tim Brown

There is a real joy that comes with putting a puppet on and having it come alive before an audience. One of the greatest compliments a puppeteer can receive is when someone says that they forgot it was a puppet because it seemed so real.

How can you reach that skill level where the puppet seems to come alive? I've got three key answers for you: practice, practice, and practice. Sounds simple, but it isn't as easy as you may think.

You've probably heard the expression, "practice makes perfect." That sounds reasonable, but isn't entirely correct. The proper phrase should be "practice makes permanent." If you have an improper golf swing and go to the driving range every day to practice but receive no instruction on how to correct it you just reinforce that improper swing. If you practice long enough and then someone tries to show you the proper way to swing a club it will feel unnatural and be harder to make the needed corrections.

Practice is important, but has to be done right to improve your skills. Let's take a look at three important elements of proper puppet practice.

Perfect Your Fundamentals

Puppet fundamentals include: solid entrances and exits, proper lip synchronization, good eye contact, maintaining proper height and position while on stage, smooth arm motions, dropping the lower jaw when speaking, and not biting words.

During practice, concentrate on your puppet as much as possible. Don't develop sloppy habits. If your entrances and exits are sloppy during practice, it will show up during performances.

One way to help is practice as though there's an audience watching; because in a way, there is. God sees everything we do and 1 Corinthians 10:31 says whatever we do, even mundane things like eating and drinking, we are to do all to the glory of God. As you practice, ask God if he is pleased with what you are doing.

Produce Stronger Muscles

Holding a puppet up in proper position for three to five minutes is not easy. It involves using muscles in a way you aren't used to and requires training and strengthening them. Weekly practices are a great place to start provided you work a puppet long enough to develop the muscles. If your arms aren't tired at the end of practice, you probably haven't been working hard enough.

There are ways outside of practice to develop your arm muscles. Playing the piano uses the muscles in a similar manner and develops and tones them. You can get hand exercisers you squeeze and release. Check the internet for exercises and stretches to develop your neck and shoulder muscles since they are important in holding your arm up for an extended time.

The easiest for me is to just keep a puppet in my office and take five to ten minutes each day to practice by playing a worship song and having the puppet sing in front of a mirror. While singing, I make sure to watch the puppet to maintain proper lip sync, drop the lower jaw, keep consistent height, etc. The practice includes one song for each arm and I don't allow myself to use my free hand to hold up my arm if it gets tired.

Proper Mental State

If you want your puppet to come alive before the audience, a proper mindset when practicing is vital. It's not always fun to practice and often you don't feel like doing it or want to put it off for later.

To get through those times, you have to think long term. You may not feel like working a puppet now, but if you don't it'll have a negative impact on an upcoming performance. Keep the goal in front of you of wanting the puppet to come alive to the audience. That will only happen through work and consistent practice.

Also, continually remind yourself of 1 Corinthians 10:31. God wants even your puppet practice to be something you do for him and for his glory. You're not just practicing for your benefit. You're practicing so God will be glorified and the audience will benefit as God uses you to communicate important truths.

Setting your mind on God and others, ahead of yourself, goes a long way to making your practice time profitable. As you follow these three key elements, you'll get to the point where your puppet does seem to come alive. Once there, though, don't get satisfied. Keep up proper practices to maintain it.