



Do Your Puppets Just Entertain or Teach?

By Tim Brown

Puppets do entertain audiences made up of children, teens, adults, or a combination. I don't want to minimize that in this article. The entertainment value of puppets makes them a great ministry tool, but it's important to understand the difference. If you have a puppet ministry and all your puppets do is entertain and make the audience laugh, are you accomplishing your purpose? If you want the audience to feel good for a short period of time, you might, but is there a lasting impact?

If your number one purpose as a team is to entertain and you achieve it consistently, that's great. But if your sole purpose is entertainment, you can still teach. Some of the best communicators I know effectively use humor to share their message. When the entertainment is used properly, it is an effective teaching method. To go beyond entertainment and teach takes planning and work, but the effects are worth the effort.

Choose Your Message

When planning a puppet show or children's ministry event, I start with one main point or core message to communicate. Then, I choose plays, lessons, scripts, etc. that reinforce the message and act it out before the audience. A good question to ask during the planning time is: "What specific truth do we want the audience to grasp as a result of our presentation?" Follow that up with a second question: "What action do we want them to take as a result of learning that truth?"

When you put together a program this way, the focus is on the message, not just performing a list of plays that you really like. The whole program will flow around a specific theme and prepare the audience for a closing challenge.

Plan Your Puppet Program

Once you have a list of plays, lessons, skits, etc., think through how you want to arrange them. We like to use the humorous ones early to loosen up the audience and save the more serious ones towards the end just before giving the challenge. When arranging the items, seek to have each play or activity build on and reinforce the teaching from the previous one.

Work on Puppetry Fundamentals

Proper puppetry is a great way to make sure you communicate your message. By that I mean proper entrances and exits, lip synchronization, maintaining proper height and position, good volume levels, etc. The goal to keep in mind is to keep the puppets as lifelike as possible.

The reason for this is simple: the more lifelike your puppet, the more natural your story will be, and the greater the impact. To understand that a little bit better think about various movies you've seen. What makes the difference between a great movie and a mediocre or poor one? Most often, it's the acting.

Great actors cause the action and dialogue to flow in a natural manner and make it believable. They don't draw attention to themselves, but blend in with the story and other characters. Poor actors draw attention to themselves and disrupt the flow of action and the story.

Let's transfer that to puppetry. If you have a great play with a solid message and it's presented with proper puppet skills, the whole presentation will flow. The audience won't focus on the puppets, but the message they're sharing.

If you have a great play with a solid message and poor puppetry, the focus will turn more to the puppets and less on the message. The key is to maintain proper fundamentals. As a team, you should work on the fundamentals until they become habit, and then keep working on them. The more natural your puppet presentation is, the greater impact it can make.

What if your team is inexperienced and just starting out? Does that mean you can't effectively minister? Here's the good news. You can effectively minister to audiences no matter what your level of expertise is as long as you communicate Bible truths. God promises in Isaiah 55:11 that when his word goes out, it will not come back empty, but will accomplish the purpose he desires.

God **can** use a poor puppet presentation for his glory. He has the power and ability. The point I'm trying to make is the better your puppetry becomes the less of a distraction your performance will be to the message.

Close with a Challenge

I recently received an invitation to an important meeting I wanted to attend. The announcement included the information about the purpose of the meeting and what would be accomplished, but did not give the time. If that's all the information I got, it wouldn't matter how much I wanted to attend, I'd miss the meeting. I could take a guess on the time and try to attend, but most likely would still miss the meeting.

When you have a great message that speaks to hearts and don't give a specific challenge, most audience members will leave wanting to do something, but probably won't. If you close with a specific challenge for the audience to do something, many will take you up on it. Make sure the challenge is specific and pertains to your audience.

The Whole Package

To make sure your puppets teach and don't just entertain, follow these important steps.

1. Choose a main theme or purpose.
2. Choose plays, lessons, skits, etc. that follow that theme.
3. Arrange the plays in an order that will best develop the theme.
4. Perform the play to the best of your ability and skill level.
5. Close with a challenge, giving the audience something specific to do in relation to the main theme.

Puppets do a great job of entertaining audiences. But if you want to minister with puppets, you have to go beyond entertainment. Following the steps outlined in this article will put you well on the way to effective ministry with your puppets.