



The Top 10 Puppet Skills to Develop

By Timothy Brown

There are a number of Top 10 lists being created, so I thought I'd chime in with my own. In this article I'll cover my Top 10 List of things to work on to develop your puppet skills.

Number 1: Proper Entrances

First impressions are important in life and in puppetry. When I'm watching a team for the first time and the puppets enter properly, it's an indication the performance is going to be good. The truth is, in the hundreds of plays I've seen from a number of teams, this is one of the most overlooked skills.

When bringing your puppet up, think of a set of three stairs and what it takes to go up them. Have your puppet copy the motion. Bring it up and forward and drop it down just a bit, up and forward and drop it a bit, up and forward and you're onstage. Don't just bob the puppet up and down.

Number 2: Proper Height

Once a puppet is on stage, think about a real stage: the floor is flat and level, so your puppet needs to maintain a consistent height while performing. I've seen puppets weave, sway from side to side, slowly sink and pop back up again. You don't see that with actors and shouldn't see it with puppets.

To maintain consistent height, you need proper arm strength which comes from solid practice. To keep the puppets from swaying or weaving, you need to concentrate on the puppet. Last year, I watched a Junior High puppet team perform, and every puppet maintained a consistent height without bobbing or weaving during a play that was at least 5 minutes long. If they can do it, just about any puppet team can.

Number 3: Proper Lip Synchronization

If the mouth movement is off from the words, it's distracting and makes it difficult to concentrate on the message. The basic rule is to open and close the mouth for each syllable the puppet speaks. The key is to open the mouth at the beginning of the syllable and close it at the end. Most beginning puppeteers tend to bite the words; they snap the mouth closed rather than smoothly opening and closing it.

Sometimes when doing a recorded play, the puppet speaks so fast you can't get every syllable, especially if you're a beginner. What do you do then? The key is to get the first and the last syllables right and as many in between as possible, and it will look ok.

Number 4: Dropping the Lower Jaw

When people talk, their lower jaw moves up and down, not their heads, and your puppet should do the same. It's easier to lift the puppet's head instead of dropping the jaw, so you have to work to develop the muscles needed to do it properly. When you're first learning, you need to concentrate on dropping the lower jaw and work at it even when your arm gets tired.

I've heard that practice makes perfect. A better statement is that practice makes permanent. What you do over and over becomes habit, whether you are doing it correctly or incorrectly. Put in the work up front to develop the proper habit and then later you can focus on other things.

Number 5: Proper Puppet Positioning and Eye Contact

When puppets talk together, they should face each other, not the audience. I've seen entire plays where 2 or 3 puppets were talking to each other, but faced the audience the entire time. I can't think of any recent conversations where I didn't face or look at the person while talking. How do you feel when someone is talking to you, but looking all over the place? When puppets look at each other when talking, it adds a touch of realism that improves the professionalism of your plays.

There are times when puppets should look at the audience... when they are addressing the audience. You may want to glance at them occasionally to show that you recognize they are there, but you should focus on the puppet you are talking to.

Number 6: Develop Left and Right Handed Skills

Most puppeteers I've come across use their strong arm for the majority of the plays and only use the weaker arm when asked to. If you're performing on the left side of the stage using your right arm, it's difficult to face and make eye contact with the puppets on your right. You either have to twist your puppet in an unnatural manner or face toward the right. If you use your left hand every time you're on the left side of the theater, your puppet will naturally face the others.

If you have a long performance, you can alternate between your right and left arm which will give you more stamina and endurance. Also, there will be times when you need to work two puppets at once. If both arms are developed properly, both puppets will maintain consistent height, posture, lip sync, etc.

Number 7: Develop Motions with One Arm

Once you have the basics down, adding motions will make your puppet appear more lifelike, if done properly. The normal tendency when starting to use the arm rods is to go overboard and use them too much or make a motion and leave the arm hanging out for the rest of the play. At that point they become more of a distraction than a help.

The goal in making arm motions is to make the puppet appear lifelike so you can add quality to the play. The key to make that happen is moderation. If you're constantly using the arms during the play just for effect, it can become a distraction as people focus on your puppet and miss the dialogue. But when you use a few pre-planned and well-practiced motions it adds to the quality. The motions reinforce what's being said and make the puppet appear lifelike. You can still add in a couple of unplanned motions if they will benefit the play, but again, don't go overboard.

Number 8: Develop Motions with Two Arms

Most motions a puppet makes are usually done with one hand, such as pointing, scratching the head, or touching the chin; but there are some that require the use of two. For instance, it's hard to clap your hands using one hand. Two arm motions a puppet can do include: clapping hands, bowing, hugging, blowing kisses, yawning, picking up objects, and raising both arms in the air in excitement.

Number 9: Moving Around the Stage

Most plays don't require a lot of movement once the puppets are up; they can just stand in one place. But there are times when a puppet needs to walk across the stage or move forward or backward. The normal tendency when walking a puppet is to bob it up and down while moving it forward. The problem with that is people don't bob up and down when they walk. What they do is swing their arms and that motion causes their shoulders to move back and forth.

To make a puppet look lifelike when walking is easy to do and adds quality to your presentation.

Step 1: move your puppet forward and twist your hand and arm about 10 degrees to the right.

Step 2: move forward again, but this time twist your hand and arm slightly to the left.

Step 3: continue the process for any additional steps. You can give a very slight bob up and down while doing the steps but don't overdo it. It's helpful to watch people walk and study their movements and transfer that to your puppet.

Step 4: make sure that you keep your puppet upright and don't lean it forward while you walk.

To make a puppet run, do the same process, but speed it up and give a little bigger bob up and down.

Number 10: Proper Exits

Since the exit is the last thing the audience sees, it should be done properly to leave a good impression. As in the entrances, think of a set of three stairs and walk the puppet down them.

1. Turn the puppet toward you. If you turn it away and try to exit, it forces you to lean your arm to the side and gives an unnatural appearance.
2. Raise it slightly, bring it forward and down.
3. Raise it slightly, bring it forward and down.

Raise it slightly one more time, bring it forward and down and you've finished.

There are ten of the most important things to work on to become a quality puppeteer. Develop each one and you're well on your way to a great puppet experience.