

Hand Puppetry: The Modern Method

Techniques for all Skill Levels
by Chad Williams

This book is a technical manual for how to perform The Modern Method of hand puppetry, also known as 'Double Finger' style: ダブルフィンガー (Japanese) or 双指 (Chinese). If you are a beginner puppeteer, it will also teach you how to create the illusion of life.

Hand puppetry, also known as glove puppetry in some parts of the world, is a very special performance art whose evolution is still ongoing. It can elicit laughs as the characters look like tiny humans, but wielded properly can also shock or horrify. In truth the greatest practitioners of this style have every move choreographed, every bit of baked-in symbolism understood, can interact safely with an audience and can communicate their message clearly without resorting to muddy movements or gimmicks.

The Modern Method officially came to the United States of America in the 20th century and was passed down through generations of professional puppeteers. We stand on the shoulders of the teachers who shared their knowledge openly, beginning with Tony Sarg - the Grandfather of American Puppetry. He infamously stole secret techniques from touring companies performing in New York City, the puppeteers he trained to perform his shows shared this knowledge as founding members of The Puppeteers of America. That generation passed the knowledge on, as I am passing it on to you.

My method of teaching this style is 5-fold, the Five Fingers that together grasp hand puppetry's base elements.

1. The Water of Life
2. Rock-Solid Foundation
3. Firey Fingers
4. Walking with Wind
5. Shouting into the Void

As these over-the-top titles suggest, you should always have fun while you perform puppets. Do take learning and perfecting techniques seriously, but remember that having fun will help you find new ways to perform and help you have a good time. Play is a fundamental pillar of good puppetry.

Before You Begin

Puppetry is an inherently physical performing art. You must remain comfortable while performing, otherwise you risk injuring yourself. Older puppeteers have switched hand puppet

styles from 1 finger to 2 in order to ward off arthritis or support weakening joints. Before you begin each performance and before you explore the contents of this book, you should stretch your fingers, wrists and shoulders. Employ a full-body stretching routine like Yoga or Tai Chi and get serious about preserving your flexibility while strengthening your body. If just one part of your body fails, you will not be able to perform.

Pre-Show Stretching

Before every performance, these are the stretches you should do. Maintain each stretch for 10 seconds. If it hurts, stop right away.

1. Shake out hands
2. Play piano - each finger up high and down low
3. Index fingers and thumbs together - form a diamond
4. Middle fingers together - form a heart and triangle
5. Do the same for ring and pinky
6. Opposite direction - thumbs together
7. Form a church, index fingers together and push down
8. Repeat with each finger
9. Neutral stance - pull index and middle fingers up
10. Live long and prosper
11. Both hands this pose - stretch middle and ring fingers apart
12. Stretch all fingers out as far as possible
13. Gently clench fists
14. Pray with bottom of palms together, arms form a line
15. Slowly move palms apart keeping fingertips together
16. Back of wrists together
17. Circular motions with wrists
18. Shake out hands

If you are looking for hand puppet patterns or a guide on how to build a simple hand puppet, go to WonderSparkPuppets.com for this free information. There you can also watch video tutorials of hand puppet basics.

Quick Puppets

To assist you in learning these techniques without constraining your fingers, you should create a 'Quick Puppet'. It will only take a few minutes and a few materials.

Materials:

- Toilet paper roll
- 2 Sheets of plain white paper
- Scissors
- Strong tape
- Masking tape
- Black marker

Photo of materials

First, take your scissors and cut the toilet paper roll vertically (hotdog style). Place your index and middle finger inside the roll, and gently curl it around these fingers with your other hand. When the roll is comfortably snug on your fingers, tape it in place with the strong tape. Your roll should not be tight at all, but your fingers should also not be floating.

Photo of roll cut, taped

Mark a line with the marker 1" from the bottom edge of the roll that is closest to your palm, and remove your fingers from the roll.

Photo of crumpled paper about to be taped

Now, crumple the two sheets of paper, then unfold them. Place them on the roll in any shape, and wrap the masking tape around it so it stays in place. This is the head of the puppet, so try and make a face. Make sure your head comes down to and does not cross the line you drew on the roll - this is where the head ends and the neck begins. Tape the paper head to the neck so it will not fall off.

Photo of completed puppet getting eyes marked on

Finally, draw two big eyes onto the paper head with your marker. It is important to know where your puppet is looking at all times, so make sure the eyes are large. That's it! You are now ready to begin.