

1: The Water of Life

This chapter will detail the most basic skills for any puppeteer. These skills can be used for any style, be it hand puppets, marionettes, object puppetry, rod puppets, mask, etc.

Photo of hand puppets in motion pose

A puppet is any inanimate object skillfully manipulated to create the illusion of life. That is the most basic universally agreed-upon definition in the United States of America (perhaps the world too). One cannot bring a puppet to life without touch. When you touch a puppet with the intent to bring it to life, your spirit flows from your head down through your arm, coursing up your hand and into the object.

Your spirit becomes like water. The puppet is a vessel you must pour yourself into. Water adopts the shape of its receptacle - your spirit will fill any object(s) you physically connect with through touch.

“...Be formless, shapeless, like water. If you put water into a cup, it becomes the cup. You put water into a bottle and it becomes the bottle. You put it in a teapot, it becomes the teapot. Now, water can flow or it can crash. Be water, my friend.” - Bruce Lee

Dead Puppet

When you sever your connection with the object, it cannot move or breathe or think and ceases to hold the possibility for life. We call that a “dead puppet”. While it may be convenient for a puppeteer to leave a puppet on stage for a moment to manipulate another object or move an item or scenery, you should never do this. It creates confusion for the audience and breaks the illusion. It becomes harder to hold the audience’s focus as they are now asking themselves why the puppet is now lifeless. The character you skillfully brought to life is now sitting in full view of the audience with a blank expression or sitting in an uncharacteristic way. Your spirit has left it behind, and everyone knows it.

Photo of dead puppet

It is possible for your puppet to become ‘dead’ even when you are physically touching it. In all puppet forms, you must look at the puppet you are manipulating 100% of the time. If you look away to reach for a prop or become distracted, your consciousness leaves the puppet momentarily and it begins to slouch or act unnaturally until you look back at it properly. The best way to ensure this does not happen, even when you must look away from your puppet, is to have it not look directly at the audience and busy itself with a motion that does not necessarily require good posture, like looking around, thinking, or walking.

Posture

If your puppet has a human-like figure, it must have a posture to match. Make sure your puppet's spine is straight and not slouching - unless you have decided that a slouch is part of its unique character. Hand puppets look best when they are standing straight up.

When you operate a hand puppet, hold it directly in front of you - not in front of your chest but in front of whichever shoulder is attached to the arm you are using. Your arm should feel comfortable and not tense. The puppet's head is about at eye-level with your eyes.

Photo of good posture

Illusion not Imitation

Remember that we are looking for "the illusion" of life, not "an imitation" of life. All the movements that you perform will be exaggerated pantomime. It should feel over-the-top, a heightened reality that borders on the surreal or fantastic. Even when using hand puppets to portray a realistic scene, you will need to use bigger than usual movements. Remember that in theater, actors use different body language in order to easily communicate their intentions to the people sitting in the back row of the audience.

Breath

Take a deep breath. Notice how your chest puffs out when you inhale, your spine straightens and your head moves up slightly. Now exhale. We will be doing an exaggerated version of these movements in miniature, using your hand. Stick your index and middle fingers up towards the sky, holding your thumb and thumb / pinky together. Your two fingers have become the neck and head, your palm has become the chest. Below the meaty muscles at the bottom of your hand is the puppet's waist. Put a puppet on your hand.

Breathe deeply and at the same time, make the same breathing motion with your hand. Try different breaths, short gasps, long sighs. Always breathe along with your puppet. Feel the connection between your body and this miniature version of yourself. Some puppeteers call this "the breath of life". You have breathed life into something that before contained no life.

Now, take off the puppet, put it down and step away. Look at the puppet. With no physical connection to you, it cannot move or breathe - it is truly dead. In this way, according to master puppeteer Sandy Spieler, you have just re-enacted your own birth, life, and death.

Photo of puppet breathing up, down

Focus

That was some pretty heavy stuff! Don't worry, as long as you are alive, your puppet still contains the potential for life. Now, put the puppet back on your hand. Find the puppet's eyes. Make sure they are pointing in the same direction, or if it has no eyes / multiple eyes, decide which direction its head must face in order to see.

Look around with your puppet. Look up, look down, look all around. Look behind them. Your puppet is curious, looking way down at your feet, looking far up at a spiderweb on the ceiling. Always know where your puppet's eyes are looking - you should be able to draw an invisible line from its eyeballs to whatever it is looking at. We call this focus.

Try looking and breathing at the same time. You can do it!

Photo of puppet looking at something, line points from eyes to something

Brains

Now that your puppet can see and breathe, let's give it some brains. Before any action, your puppet must show that it took a moment to decide what to do. Before it takes a step, it must decide which direction to move, and so on. This greatly enhances the illusion of life.

Hold the fingers in your non-puppet hand up like blades of grass. Now, bring up your puppet facing the audience (away from you). Look around, and eventually see the grass. Instead of immediately crossing to it, have the puppet STOP for a moment. What is your puppet thinking? "What is that? Have I seen that before? Maybe I could get that." Once you have decided on an inner monolog, thought a moment, now the puppet is ready to make a decision. It faces the audience and silently thinks, "I will go over there." Now it turns toward the grass, walks over to investigate. What happens next is up to you.

Taking time to think is one of the three most important tools available to you. If your puppet does not show a capacity to STOP, think, decide, then move, your illusion will be weak. Even in a scene where there is great urgency, the puppet must have a brain. Also, the puppet doesn't have to tap its head every time you want to communicate "I AM THINKING". Just pause all movement, let the moment breathe.

Photo of puppet and grass, hand on chine pose

See, Think, React

Did you get all that? It will come in time with practice. So far your puppet can breathe, see with its eyes, and think about what to do next. Now let's put it all together.

Bring up the grass again (your non-puppet hand with its fingers up). Let's pretend that the grass is completely unexpected, something the puppet has never seen. Repeat the same scene from before - the puppet enters, looks around, notices the grass. This time give it a big reaction.

"What is that!? Wow! I have never seen that before! Is it safe?" Give the puppet a reaction to what it is seeing, and think about how we can communicate its feelings, what it is thinking, to the audience. What are some different emotions it can have to react to this new thing?

This time when it crosses to investigate, let its feelings lead its inner monolog and its movements. "Ugh, I hate that! I can't stand it! Disgusting!" or "Are those bones? Oh no, I can't do this, I'm too scared" or whatever you can think of. Try starting the scene with different emotional takes and end it differently each time. Remember to draw an invisible line between the puppet's eyes and what it is looking at, remember to breathe, remember to take your time and have the puppet think about what to do next.

Photo of puppet and fingers forming grass

Secret Technique #1: Finger Twist

Looking around the stage with your puppet, its entire body moves to accommodate the head. However, due to the special nature of the Double Finger style, we can do a more subtle movement. Inside your puppet's head are two fingers. While maintaining pressure on the inner neck with both fingers, twist the fingers around each other. Your puppet's head will turn with a beautiful subtle movement. Now twist the other way - your puppet will turn its head while its body remains stationary.

If you have trouble with this technique, it may be that the puppet's neck is too tight against your fingers or so open and wide that you cannot easily turn the head. If this is the case, the puppet must be adjusted.

Photo of Finger Twist