

## 2: A Rock-Solid Foundation

“I hated every minute of training, but I said, ‘Don’t quit. Suffer now and live the rest of your life as a champion.’”  
- Muhammad Ali

This chapter is about understanding the fundamentals of a specific puppet form: hand puppetry. To be more precise, as there are many different Ways about how to perform a puppet on your hand, this book teaches ‘The Modern Method’ of performing a hand puppet.

### **The Three Styles**

Hand puppetry can be traced back to its ancient Chinese origins as Bu Dai Xi (boo-die-she) - an action-packed, miniature version of the Beijing operas of the day performed on the street. Beijing operas themselves began as minimalist street performances (modern shows hold true to this ‘less is more’ mentality). Inside the puppet, three fingers form one thick arm and only one finger is inside the neck / head. The puppets are built specifically for tricks and gimmicks including intricate weapon fights, flying through the air and changing expressions. As Bu Dai Xi evolved in isolation in the East, a similar form was passed along the Silk Road and began to develop separately in the West.

Photo of Chinese style

Photo of Chinese puppet in same pose

Raunchy, political street theater that entertained and spat fire at the societal ills of the day erupted on the streets of 1600s Italy. The puppet Pulcinella and his European descendants (Polichinelle, Kasperle, Mister Punch) popularized a new style where a roughly manipulated puppet conversed directly with the audience. This egomaniacal character who does whatever they want evolved from archetypes in the Italian improvised theater tradition of Commedia dell'arte. Inside these puppets three fingers formed both arms and the neck / head. The remaining two fingers tucked underneath and were hidden by oversized costumes.

Photo of 1 Finger style

Photo of Punch puppet in same pose

The Modern Method, popularized in 20th century America by Carol Fijan, Paul Vincent Davis and others, allows a puppeteer more strength in the hand puppet's head and neck and arms. This strength allows for more nuanced movements than Pulcinella, and more balance in the limbs than Bu Dai Xi. There are no extra fingers to hide in the costume - and there is at least one hidden technique that can happen inside the puppet's body to create a superbly subtle movement. It is not as technical or high-flying as its Asian cloth-bag counterpart, so it is easier for beginners to grasp. One does not need special flexibility training to properly maintain finger posture but it remains an innately physical performing art. It's as 'middle of the road' as you can get.

Photo of Double Finger style  
Photo of puppet in same pose

Photo of the 3 puppet styles together

These three styles are brothers - separated by time and space but all related by the human hand. There are other ways, such as the Catalan 3-Finger or puppets with a rod in the head that puppeteers hold onto while moving its arms. We will save those stories for another day and focus on the style I have been practicing since 2009, The Modern Method.

Photo of you doing Neutral stance

### **The Two Major Stances**

All finger movements must be performed from a stance, a pose that your fingers must form in order to begin a specific movement. There are three major stances that most Moves spring from, and three minor stances for less common movements.

First is Neutral Stance, where your fingers are crossed in front of the puppet's body. When your puppet is not moving, not talking, not walking, always return to this stance. It is the beginning of all movements and where every action chain eventually ends. From this stance you can transition into any of the other stances or apply a Move. Your fingers should be at rest when in Neutral.

The second stance is Draw Back. From Neutral, draw your ring and pinky fingers back toward the puppet's body and bring your thumb to the puppet's side. Your hand becomes flat. From Draw Back, most Moves can be performed. It is the most common beginning stance for all Moves.

Each stance can be done with just one puppet arm, or both. From Neutral, either puppet arm can transition into these stances while the other stays firm.

## **Neutral Stance**

Photo of Neutral hand

## **Draw Back Stance**

Photo of Draw Back hand

## **The Three Minor Stances**

### **Arms Forward Stance**

While most Moves can be performed from Draw Back, there are certain movements that will naturally start elsewhere. These are less common but will strengthen your performance if you think about starting a movement chain from them. Again, you can choose to do these poses with one of the puppet's arms, or two.

Photo of Arms Forward hand

## **Arms Up Stance**

From Neutral or Draw Back, stretch your ring and pinky fingers and thumb back and away from the middle of the puppet as far as they will allow. Your hand forms a flat W shape. This is the natural next step of Draw Back.

Photo of Arms Up hand



### **Arms Back Stance**

Use a significant effort to have the puppet's hands move behind their back and head. This can be exaggerated by tilting the head forward slightly.

Photo of Arms Back hand