

5: Shouting into the Void

“We speak with more than our mouths.
We listen with more than our ears.”
- Fred Rogers, puppeteer

In this chapter you will learn how to speak through a puppet. You will learn what pitfalls to avoid, and there are many. You will learn the basics of split focus and how to successfully operate two puppets at once. Finally, puppeteers love to ‘talk shop’ and go on at length about their craft, *some even write whole books about it* - but I will keep the philosophy section at the end very brief.

Photo of puppet, emphasis on mouth / speaking

How to Speak

Stand up and speak a sentence out loud as if you are on stage. An actor will use their entire body to emphasize visually what they are thinking or feeling, and so should a hand puppet. Did you thrust your head and neck all around when you spoke? No. So: do NOT wobble a hand puppet's head when they speak. They can gesture, move, walk, any kind of movement but do not wiggle their head. This will break the illusion and it just looks plain bad.

Face the Audience

When a puppet speaks, it faces the audience. If there is another character on stage, they face the puppet who is delivering a line and they do not move. This is called drawing focus. Most hand puppets do not have moving mouths. It is imperative then that the puppet who is speaking be the only thing on stage moving, and when they are done speaking they should stop moving. This helps the audience understand who is talking.

There are exceptions to this rule, the puppet speaking a line may briefly face away from the audience to gesture or add emphasis. However, when two puppets are on stage it becomes very important to stick to this rule.

Photo of two puppets at the same time

Two at Once

To perform two hand puppets at the same time, simply put one puppet on each hand and walk them onto stage. What is their relationship to each other, to the audience? How can a puppeteer divide their spirit between two puppets, or make sure both puppets maintain good posture and not become 'dead'?

The answer is split focus. Instead of looking directly at your puppet, or even the puppet who is currently speaking and gesturing, set your sights directly between both puppets. Stare out at the audience, pick a point in space and look at that while keeping both puppets in your eye's periphery. You will be able to see both puppets at once and ensure their movement stays crisp. By practicing a two-puppet scene over and over, you will become accustomed to what needs to happen physically and will be able to relax and focus on acting through both characters.

Exercise: put on two puppets and hold them in front of you. Have one face the audience while the other faces the first puppet. Have the puppets count to 10, alternating who is speaking. Whomever speaks a number must face the audience while the other looks at the speaker. Go back and forth until you reach 10. Do this again with different character voices, different emotions, get the feeling of "the speaker faces the audience, the listener faces the speaker". Mechanical movement will become fluid movement.

Photo of one puppet facing the camera, another puppet faces the first puppet

Mirror Mode

The advantage of one puppeteer performing two puppets at the same time is that your hands can perfectly mirror each other's movements. Two different puppeteers may be able to perform a single character each more beautifully but will not be able to match each other's movements like a single puppeteer can. However, this should be used sparingly. When you are walking two characters at once, alternate both who is moving up and who is moving down while (if possible) simultaneously alternate who is tilting left or right. This will help the audience believe that they are two completely separate entities, and not just the same person twice.

Hand puppetry has a long history of being a highly interactive medium. Street performances relied on getting audiences to shout back to keep them engaged in the show.

Photo of puppets mirroring each other

How to Ask a Question

If you are going to interact with the audience directly, there are certain paths for success. Never ask a question where you are not prepared for the answer. If you ask the audience if they prefer the Knight to win the battle or the Dragon to win the battle, you had better be prepared for either eventuality. Also, when given the chance to speak during the show, the audience is unpredictable. What time of day it is, whether or not the audience has eaten lately, what's going on in the audience's life, all of these are factors that will influence what they say for good or bad. We can iron out all of these potential problems with some quick solutions.

1. Never ask an open-ended question. Instead ask questions that can be answered in 1 word.
2. Use a 'fill in the blank' sentence with an obvious answer instead of asking a question.
3. Prepare a strong in-character reason for not doing what the audience wanted.
4. If you give the audience a true choice between two things, have those things ready to incorporate into the show.
5. Be prepared for no answer at all. If the audience is silent, find a way to move on without it.
6. Never nag or beg for the audience to participate. Some audience members don't feel like talking and that's okay.

If the audience is fixated on something, acknowledge it only once and move on quickly. This will let them feel heard and allow you to carry on with the show.

Photo of puppet talking to audience member

Hostile Audience

Above all else you must maintain control of the audience. You are in charge and must do your utmost best to maintain a safe atmosphere for the show to exist. At any point if things get out of hand, if the audience begins to stand up, yell out inappropriately, throw things, threaten or otherwise act poorly, it is your responsibility to stop the show and calm things. Allowing a hostile audience to grow into an angry mob can have dire consequences. Knowing this, you must do your absolute best to never stop a performance as it both obliterates the illusion of life for the remaining duration of the show and it may empower a hostile audience to get just as bad again.

Never heckle the audience, single someone out or make someone feel bad for how they responded or acted. Always make yourself the victim of the joke. Make the audience feel good about themselves and they will behave better. Kindness will always triumph over anger.

Photo of puppeteer and audience member

Training the Audience

Whether or not the audience will behave or be endeared to your show depends on what you do before the performance even begins. If you are in a theater, the audience already understands what is expected of them and only the stage is illuminated. If you are in a non-traditional setting, you must do your best to control the lighting, ambient sound and other aspects to ensure the audience can easily focus. During the preshow, give the audience some general rules about expected behavior and what will happen on stage. If they are given a task, dance move, repeated line or anything to do later during the performance, show them exactly how to do it yourself first and then practice it all together immediately afterward.

You can ask for the audience's help at any time with specific language. Do a countdown from 3 to give everyone time to focus first. Repeat the same type of introduction to a question, action or movement so they know what is coming. If the response is muddled, gently and firmly tell them to try it again on your mark.

What Makes Puppetry Special

An actor presents themselves to the audience, all eyes are on them. They strive for truth, but in reality they are simply pretending to be someone else. A puppeteer is an actor too, but one who can command the focus of the audience- presenting a neutral third party (the puppet) who has been built for this particular role and nothing else. The audience understands that at the end of the show, an actor will remove their makeup and go home as a regular person. However, a puppet cannot take off its paint, or its costume, it is only alive when a puppeteer brings it to life - for one scene or one particular moment in time. A skilled puppeteer who can fool the audience with the illusion of life is assisted by the audience's innate subconscious knowledge that this moving object is NOT in fact alive. It is not pretending to be something else - it merely IS.

Does a performer also need to be a good builder? Does a builder also need to be a good performer? In either case, no, but it helps to have some working knowledge of both. Very few puppeteers are excellent at every single aspect of puppetry, and many choose to focus on a single aspect of it. An exquisite performer should understand how to quickly repair their puppet, and the greatest builder should understand the challenges of performing on stage. Whether you choose to be in front of the curtain or behind it, you should always practice kindness. Kindness to the audience, to the people involved in your production, and kindness to yourself.

Why Puppets

I ask this question to myself before I begin any work on a new puppet production. Could this be accomplished with regular actors on a stage? If the answer is 'Yes', then I do not continue, the idea dies right then and there. If the answer is 'No', the only way this could be presented on a stage is with puppets, then we begin our work of creating a new story. Puppets can grow or shrink physically, you can set fire to them, they can break apart into tiny pieces and be put back together again - there are no rules when it comes to puppet theater. Therefore the only theater productions you should create that are 'puppets only' should be the ones where having puppets makes it work.

“Daddy, is the puppet alive?”

After a show, some puppeteers are quick to show that it's all just a trick, that puppets aren't real - all to satisfy an audience's curiosity or to help sew interest so a child may grow up to become a puppeteer and continue the art form. Some puppeteers insist that a puppet is real, they are alive and that “they are only sleeping” when not on stage. Which is true? Are they both correct?

Puppets carry with them the lineage of sacred objects. The first puppets were symbolic figures used by ancient humans to represent their gods. Priests who used masks or shadow figures in religious rituals were the first true puppeteers. Consider also that the human brain is hard-wired to recognize faces. The reason that the illusion of life works is because in the back of our minds we want these characters to be real. Some people see faces in everyday objects, it's the same thing. Puppetry has existed in many different forms throughout human history. So, are the puppets you manipulate real?

The great puppet master Bernd Ogrodnik once told Z. and me: “Of course they're real! I am real, and they're me!” I believe this is the correct answer to the age-old question. The puppet is a vessel waiting for a spirit to inhabit it. When you're in there, it's real. It's you.

Photo of puppet looking directly at camera.