



7 Key Ingredients for Successful Puppetry

By Tim Brown

When it comes to working puppets, the goal is for them to look as natural as possible so your message can come through without distractions. A puppet that makes unnatural gestures or movements tends to draw unwanted attention. When the audience is focused on a puppet and something that appears unnatural, they aren't keying in on the message.

To guard against that, here are seven key ingredients to help make sure your puppet looks and acts in a natural manner.

Proper Entrances

The first thing your audience sees is the puppet coming on stage. How do you bring it in? Do you pop it up? Bounce it in? Does it just appear? None of these are natural ways a person would enter. To bring a puppet in properly, picture in your mind a set of three stairs and have your puppet walk up them to get to the stage.

Proper entrances may seem minor, but they do set the tone for the rest of the play. When watching a play, if I see proper entrances, it's a good sign the other parts of the play will go well. If someone is careful to enter properly, they're likely to be careful on the other puppetry aspects.

Proper Exits

This is the last thing the audience sees, so it leaves a lasting impression. A proper exit says you care about the entire performance, not just the speaking part. It's a sign of excellence, that you care enough to maintain quality the entire time the audience sees your puppet.

If you get sloppy on the exits, it's usually a matter of time before you get sloppy on other puppetry aspects. To do a proper exit, turn the puppet so it faces you and walk down those imaginary three steps.

Proper Lip Synchronization

This means to move the mouth in proper time to the words the puppet speaks. If you've ever watched a movie where the sound track is off, you've seen how annoying it is when the mouth movement is off. When the lips and words are off even by a second, it's almost enough to turn the movie off.

If it's annoying while watching a movie, it's same when watching a puppet performance. The goal is to open and close the mouth for each syllable and avoid biting the words. When you bite the words, the mouth is closed when it should be open and open when it should be closed.

Dropping the Lower Jaw

When people talk, their lower jaw moves up and down. I've seen many puppets do just the opposite: their upper jaw (and head) moves up and down while the lower jaw remains still. If you saw a person talking that way, you would wonder what was wrong with them.

Proper Height

When talking, people generally don't move their body up and down. If they are nervous they may move side to side, but their height stays the same. Often while talking, puppets will slowly sink, sometimes to the point where you can only see their forehead, which makes it hard to enjoy the play.

Puppets sink for a couple of reasons. Sometimes it's caused by fatigue. When the arm gets tired, it tends to drop. Other times, it's a lack of attention. The puppeteer is focused on the script or something else and doesn't realize their puppet has dropped. Either way, it should be avoided.

Eye Contact

Some puppets look at the audience their entire time on stage. That's ok if they're talking to the audience, but they're speaking to another puppet. How would you feel if you were talking to someone and that person looked somewhere else during the entire conversation?

The puppets obviously won't feel anything, but the audience will. They may not realize the specifics, but will know that something is off. When puppets are talking together, they should look at each other. They can glance at the audience from time to time, but even that isn't needed.

Puppet Posture

Puppets should maintain good posture. A puppet that leans forward, backward, or to one side or the other is a distraction. Puppets tend to lean when the puppeteer's arm gets tired or when they're focused on the script or something else.

The easiest way to maintain proper puppet posture is to make sure your arm muscles are developed enough to keep your puppet up at least five minutes. Also, make sure that you know your plays so well you don't have to keep your eyes on the script. You accomplish these by maintaining consistent practices.

While it's true most audience members will still enjoy the puppets if these seven fundamental areas are not properly done, they'll still miss out on what could have been a quality play.

When all of these are in place, the presentation is realistic and the audience's attention is on the message. Do these poorly and too much attention is drawn to the puppets, which weakens your message's impact.

To do these seven things well in your performances, work on them in your practice time. Don't let puppeteers get away with sloppy entrances or exits. Drill on the fundamentals until they are second nature. The end result will be quality programs where the puppets look and act natural and an excellent opportunity to convey your message.