



The Number 1 Goal in Working a Puppet

Help your puppet become more lifelike while performing.

The number one goal in working a puppet is simple—it is to make the puppet look as lifelike as possible. The more lifelike your puppet appears, the more attention the audience will pay to your message. I saw this recently on a Sunday morning when I had an opportunity to preach at our church. I found a song that fit in perfect with the message and decided to have a puppet sing it. I used a full body puppet and stood with him on the platform while he sang. Even though I was standing right there and it was obvious that I was working the puppet, the people forgot about me and focused on “Sam” and the song he was singing.

In doing the presentation, I looked at the puppet while he sang, which is expected when someone is singing a solo. But while looking, I concentrated on getting the lip synchronization right, dropping the lower jaw, opening the mouth wider on the louder notes, moving the mouth slightly during the vibrato parts of the song, etc. Because of that, people weren’t distracted by poor lip sync or mouth movement and could enjoy the presentation. I then linked from the song to an object lesson and then the message. Since the puppet did come across as lifelike, it added to the whole presentation. One guy later said that he knew I was working the puppet, but he couldn’t help but watch the puppet anyway.

You see, the goal in ministering with puppets is not for the audience to focus on the puppets themselves, but to understand the message they are trying to teach. For example, if the lip synch is off through the whole play, it can become frustrating to audience members and keep their attention on the puppet and not the message. Think about how you feel when you watch a movie or TV show where there is a small delay between when the people start to speak and you hear the voice. If it goes on for any length of time you’ll probably switch to a different program unless you really like the one you’re watching. If you really like it, you may stick it out, but it won’t be enjoyable.

This might bring up the question: “Do you have to be an expert puppeteer before people will listen to your message?” The answer is no. Puppets are almost universally appealing and the audience will overlook some things, especially if they know that you aren’t that experienced. You don’t have to put on a flawless performance to minister, but you do want to minimize any distractions that might hinder the message.

So, how do you make your puppet become more lifelike? The answer is fairly simple. You have to focus as much of your attention as possible on the puppet while working it. If you are doing a pre-recorded play, it works best to have the lines memorized and no script in front of you. That way, you can focus your attention on your puppet. If you are doing a live script, it’s a little harder since you do need to look at the script. In that case, you should practice the script enough times so you can go through the play glancing at the script and focusing on your puppet.

(In my book, Experience Puppets, I have a section on how to learn scripts and pre-recorded plays so you can accomplish this.)

The reason you need to focus on your puppet is because there are a lot of things to look out for. The puppet needs to stay a consistent height, should remain straight up instead of leaning on the stage, and needs to make eye contact with the audience and other puppets. The puppet's mouth needs to be in sync with the words, you may want to include arm motions, you need to make proper entrances and exits, you need to be careful not to crowd other puppets, etc.

You may be new to puppetry and don't know about all that yet. Don't get discouraged. Anyone can improve their puppet performance by consistently following these steps.

1. When working a puppet, if possible spend 85% of your time watching your puppet.
2. While watching, focus on those things you know you need to do to make the puppet appear lifelike.
3. Keep this commitment during practices, not just during performances.

During practices, don't slack off. You need to maintain concentration during practices and you have the added bonus of having people watch you and offer suggestions. Work hard during practices and you'll find that the presentation will go much smoother.