



The Solo Puppeteer: Taking Your Puppet Outside the Stage

By Tim Brown

One way to win an audience is to do something unexpected; something that'll catch them off guard. When working puppets in a theater, the audience only sees the puppet from the waist up, which is what they expect. You can add an element of surprise by bringing the puppet out of the theater and in front of the audience.

Recently, during our junior church program, I decided to have a puppet sing a special Christmas song, but wanted to do it in a different way. Normally our puppets are behind the theater so the curtains separate them from the children. I was using the song to conclude my Bible lesson and wanted the puppet to be out front, close to the children.

We have a puppet that came with a set of detachable legs, so I decided to attach them and bring the puppet outside the theater. I placed the puppet in the theater and started my lesson. When finished, I stepped inside the theater, put the puppet on, and came out of the theater with him. The children were expecting him to come up behind the stage and were surprised that he was, instead, right in front of them. The song was about five minutes long, but kept their attention the entire time.

For this presentation, I had the song cued and started playing it while introducing the puppet and the song. Then the puppet sang the song. He did a solo, but I could have joined in on the chorus to add a bit more mystery to the performance.

So, how do you work a puppet outside of the stage without being a ventriloquist? The first thing is to choose which puppet to use. In my presentation, I used a male hand puppet that fit the part and had attachable legs. That worked great for me, but what if you don't have a full bodied puppet or puppet with attachable legs? Does that mean you can't work a puppet outside the theater? Not at all. I've often used a regular hand puppet effectively without a stage. The key is to find some way to hide where the puppet goes onto your arm. (It will work without hiding it, but it's better if you can.)

Once I took a portable podium, put a box on top of it, and covered it with a velour cloth for a nice appearance. (It also kept the audience from looking at the bottom of the podium to see if the puppet had legs.) Another time I used a similar set up with a music stand. You can stand by a piano, behind a pulpit, or cradle the puppet with your free arm. With a little imagination, it isn't hard to find a way to work a puppet outside a stage.

Once the puppet is in front of the people, how do you make it talk? The easiest is to do what I did above. Bring the puppet out, introduce him or her, and have them sing a pre-recorded song. You can join in during the chorus or make it a duet. When done, give a few closing remarks to finish the presentation or link to the next part of your program.

If you want something more interactive and have access to a microphone, you can do a two person puppet play. Take one part for yourself and the other for your puppet. Have another puppeteer hide and read the puppet's lines into the microphone at the appropriate places. (You can place your copy of the script beside the puppet.) It's a good idea to have the script well learned so you don't have to search for lines if you lose your place.

Another option is to purchase (or produce) audio scripts where the puppet's lines are pre-recorded and there is a gap where the puppeteer speaks. This method is very effective, but takes work to get the proper timing down.

When working a puppet without a theater, use the same basic puppet skills as you would inside one. Make sure you drop the lower jaw when speaking, don't bite the words, and maintain proper lip synchronization. Follow the basic rule of seeking to make the puppet look as lifelike as possible. Be careful when you are talking that the puppet doesn't "go to sleep" and stop all movement. While you speak, be conscious of the puppet. Have it look at you, nod or shake its head, act surprised, glance at the audience, etc.

Bringing the puppet out of the stage and in front of the audience is an effective way to change your routine and captivate the audience's attention. If you do a good job performing with the puppet you'll hold that attention and communicate effectively.