

Experience Puppets



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How to Reach and Teach with Puppets

Sample eBook Excerpt

To purchase the entire eBook go to:
www.ExperiencePuppets.com

TIMOTHY BROWN

(Puppet Clipart drawn and produced by Jeremiah Brown)

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Special Thanks to my wife, Cindy. This book would not be possible without her help and support.

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PART 1:

INTRODUCTION



Through this book and its application, our desire is for you to Experience Puppets. Not just learn how to work them or pick up a couple of tricks, but to experience all that puppetry has to offer:

- The enjoyment of putting a puppet on and having it “come alive” to the audience.
- The knowledge that you are communicating important truths to the audience—often without them even noticing.
- The thrill of hearing children repeat lines from plays showing that learning did take place.

Our puppet experience began over twenty-five years ago when my wife and I began teaching in the Children’s Church program at our church. We needed fresh ideas and innovative ways to communicate Bible truths to the children in our care. In looking through materials at the church, we discovered two puppets—a pink hippo and an orange lion—and some script books. We were intrigued.

We decided to try puppetry, even though we’d never done anything like it before. The door was open and we stepped through, and began our puppet experience.

Our church was in the midst of a building project, and had plenty of material on hand to construct a theater. Using a couple of 2"x4" boards and a sheet of wood paneling, we created our first puppet theater—a “lean-to” effect we could hide behind and cover with a tarp.

That first theater was nothing fancy or exciting to look at, but it served the purpose. We didn’t know what to expect, but when the puppets came up and stumbled through the first script—the kid’s loved it and we were hooked.

You see, there’s something about puppets that draws attention. Puppetry is a powerful tool you can use to teach any age. But like any tool, it works best when used properly.

In this first section, we’ll lay important groundwork in understanding the “why” of using puppets and give you insight into the possibilities before you as you begin (or continue) your experience. After that, we’ll get down to the “nitty-gritty” of how to properly work puppets.

Are you ready to begin? Grab a cup of coffee (tea, hot chocolate, hot cider), turn the page and let’s get started. Your Puppet Experience awaits...

CHAPTER 1

What's the Big Deal about Puppets?



When we started in puppetry, it wasn't because we had heard a lot about puppets or their effectiveness. We had run out of material and needed something quick. Puppets were the first thing that caught our attention.

Now that we've been working puppets for over twenty-five years, I've had time to think about why it's a great idea to get involved in puppetry. There are more reasons today than I would have guessed at the beginning.

Puppets are Great Visual Aids

We live in a visual society. Between television, videos, DVDs, video games, the internet, and other media forms, we've become used to seeing while hearing. Puppets do a great job of allowing you to see something while learning. In the hands of a skilled puppeteer, the puppet will seem to come alive to the audience. The movement, voices, entrances, and exits all combine to draw the audience into the play; often to the point that you forget they aren't real. In fact, I've heard that one of the reasons puppets are made with a thumb and three fingers is to give the audience a subtle reminder that they aren't real.

Besides being a visual object, puppets tell stories—or in reality act out stories. People of all ages enjoy hearing or watching a well told story. If you aren't sure about that, try going without television or videos for a week. How many times will people sit and watch a TV program that they've seen several times? Is it because they have nothing to do or don't remember what happened?

No. Usually they can quote many lines right along with the actors. It happens because people like to hear and see stories.

For years, scientists have told us the more senses used in the education process; the more learning that takes place. If you listen to a lecture—even if you're fascinated by the topic—you won't remember much of what was said a day or two later. If you listen to the lecture and take notes, you will retain more information for a longer time. If you listen, take notes, and see a visual presentation at the same time, the amount you learn and retain grows even more. In fact, there are some lectures,

sermons, and devotionals I still remember from over ten years ago. Why? Each one of them used a visual object of some kind.

When you consider that we are in a visual society with people that love stories and retain more information when seeing and hearing, it almost seems that puppets were designed to enhance learning. That alone is reason enough for any educator—sacred or secular—to look into puppetry. But this just scratches the surface. Let’s look at some more reasons.

Puppets Are Versatile

Another benefit to puppets is that they can be used any number of ways and fit into many kinds of programs. People most often think of puppets acting out a story in a theater or stage. You don’t have to have other puppets on stage though. A single puppet can do a monologue about a specific subject and if done properly, can hold the audience’s attention for as long as he is with them. A puppet can talk to a “live” individual standing beside the stage and even engage the audience in the banter.



Puppets can lead singing, teach songs, and sing songs. One year, we put together a puppet band including keyboard, drums, guitar, trumpets, and a saxophone. We found realistic looking instruments in a toy store that were the perfect size for puppets. While the puppets “played” the instruments, we had a trio of puppets as the singers. The audience loved it. The puppet band performed a couple of times a month in our Children’s Church program to the delight and enjoyment of the children and staff.

We’ve used puppets in churches, camps, parks, backyards, and recreation centers. For theaters, our regular stage consists of a PVC pipe frame with velour curtains, but it doesn’t work in every situation. Often, necessity is the mother of invention. We’ve done puppets behind a piano, behind cardboard sheets, in a baptistry, behind an overhead projector screen, and other places I can’t remember. I’ve even used a puppet while at a podium with a box or stack of books hiding where the puppet went on my arm. Whatever your situation is, if you look carefully, you can usually find a way to incorporate puppets.

Puppets Help Set the Atmosphere for Learning

Children often relate to and will open up to a puppet quicker than an adult. I’m a quiet and reserved guy who enjoys ministering to children, but I seldom have children flock around me to chat. But if I put a puppet on and start talking with one child, in no time at all, that one child becomes a group. They aren’t talking to me—they’re talking to the puppet. Try it sometime and see what happens.

We were doing puppets in a Junior Church program one winter Sunday. While it was cold outside, inside it was hot. One girl kept her heavy winter coat on and resisted any attempt to get her to take it off. We were hot without coats and knew that she had to be quite uncomfortable wearing that heavy coat. I had a puppet up on stage talking to my wife who was standing beside the theater. The puppet looked at the girl, called her by name and asked, “Aren’t you awfully hot in that coat? You can take it off if you’d like.” Immediately, she removed the coat and settled in with the group for the rest of our time together.

You see, normally puppets aren’t threatening or intimidating to children. Sometimes adults, through no fault of their own, can be intimidating. If an adult intimidates a child, they put up a wall of protection that can hinder learning. Using puppets helps to lower those walls and makes room for learning. Also, when they see a puppet talking and laughing with an adult, they often begin to loosen up. If that person is ok for the puppet, he or she is probably ok for me.

Puppets Are a Great Teaching Tool...

PART 2:

BEGINNING AND ADVANCED PUPPETRY



Through this book and its application, our desire is for you to Experience Puppets. Not just learn how to work them or pick up a couple of tricks, but to experience all that puppetry has to offer.

Shortly after starting our puppet experience, a traveling puppet team visited our church and did a program for Sunday School and then did a second program in our Junior Church. The team was short handed, and upon learning that we were doing puppets, asked us to help with the evening program. This became the start of an intensive six-week training program.

Mind you, it wasn't planned as a puppet-training program. It was more like on the job training as each weekend we traveled to a church and put on a full weekend of puppet meetings. For those weekends, our primary responsibility was to work puppets and our training came during practice sessions. As we practiced the plays, the director was out front watching and giving instructions. "Bernie, don't bite your words." "Priscilla, you're sinking, get back up." "Herb, stop leaning on the stage."

These comments were easy for him to say—he wasn't working the puppet. It wasn't his arm that was tired. But, he wanted quality and we worked hard to give it to him. Even though it was difficult at times, it paid off. We quickly became good puppeteers and understood the importance of quality in our shows.

In this section, we'll share with you many of the lessons we learned then and in the following years. We'll look at some mistakes to avoid and skills to develop that will add quality and professionalism to your presentations.

Are you ready to continue? Your Puppet Experience awaits...

CHAPTER 3

Puppets are Tools, Not Toys?



Puppets are fun to work and it's easy to think of them as toys. That can lead to playing with them which can cause you to damage or mar the puppet. That's not a good thing when you consider that puppets cost anywhere from twenty-five to two hundred dollars per puppet or more.

One common practice among inexperienced puppeteers is to bite things with the puppet's mouth. Don't do it! A puppet's mouth is usually a piece of cardboard covered with cloth. If you bite something and put a crease in the cardboard, you can't get it out. That crease will most likely affect the appearance of the puppet in a negative way.

You may ask how I know this. Well, I started out my puppet experience as an inexperienced puppeteer and guess what? I bit things with a puppet until I damaged the cardboard. Fortunately, it wasn't with an expensive puppet, but needless to say, I quickly learned from the experience.

Instead of looking at puppets as toys, consider them tools and an investment. They are tools to impact people with the gospel and to educate them about all kinds of topics, both sacred and secular. They are an investment in benefiting the lives of others. As with any tool or investment, they work best when treated properly.

Proper Care of Puppets

As a tool, if puppets receive proper treatment, they will last a long time. We still use some puppets purchased over twenty years ago and they still look and work great. Here are some things to keep in mind about puppet care:

- When a puppet goes on stage, its appearance should be neat unless the situation calls for something different. Something often overlooked is hair. Before a performance, you should take the few minutes needed to brush each puppet's hair. Then, in order for it to stay neat, you can spray it with a non-aerosol hair spray. Make sure it is non-aerosol or you may damage the puppet's hair. It is usually non-aerosol if it comes in a pump action sprayer.
- When your puppet is on and ready to go onstage, do a quick hair check. If it has...



CHAPTER 4

Basic Puppetry Skills



Basic skills include everything from putting the puppet on, to bringing it up on stage, to proper mouth movement, positioning the puppets on stage, and bringing the puppet off the stage. We'll look at each of these in some detail.

Putting On a Puppet

Before you can use a puppet to teach or entertain, you first have to put it on. Many puppets made today make that a simple process. But, just in case, here is the proper way to put on and hold a puppet.

Hold the bottom of the puppet between your thumb and index finger of the hand not working the puppet. Place your other hand up inside the puppet with your fingers resting on the top of the mouth and your thumb on the bottom. If your puppet has a hollow head, you may want to stuff the head with foam or cloth so your fingers have a snug fit. If there is space above your fingers, it will be more difficult to work the puppet and your hand will tire quickly.

Once the puppet is on your hand, you need to hold it properly. The puppet needs to be straight up and down. If you tip the puppet to the right or left, it will have an unnatural appearance. Also, bend your wrist so the puppet is looking down. Remember that most often the puppet will be higher than the audience, so they look straight out, they will look over the heads of the people watching.

When the puppet isn't talking, you need to remember to squeeze your thumb and fingers together so the puppet's mouth is closed. You don't have to squeeze tightly, just enough to keep the lips together.

One thing you'll discover is that when you hold a puppet up properly, your arm will begin to tire. Working a puppet uses your arm muscles in a way that you aren't used to. It will take some time and practice to strengthen those muscles. We have discovered, though, that piano players adapt quickly because they use the muscles in a similar way.

We've found that weekly practices are the best way to develop the arm muscles. As you practice, don't just work on your strong arm. Make sure you develop the muscles in both arms. You should work to develop both left and right-handed skills. This comes in handy when you have two puppets up at once.

Walking the Puppet on the Stage

Once the puppet is on your hand, the next step is to bring it up on stage where the audience can see it. The basic goal to keep in mind as you work a puppet is that you want it to appear as lifelike as possible—from the moment it comes on stage to the moment it is off the stage. For proper entrances, that means the puppet needs to look as though it is climbing a short set of stairs to get up on the stage.

Before we get to the proper way of bringing a puppet on stage, let's look at some common entrances that fall short of the above goal.

- **The Magical, or Toaster Entrance**—this is where the puppet just appears, or pops up, on the stage. The only real individuals I know of who use this type of entrance are magicians and they usually have a cloud of smoke surrounding their appearance.
- **The Elevator Entrance**—this is similar to the Toaster Entrance where the puppet slowly rises up on stage. I don't know of any stage that uses an elevator to get people on or off.
- **The Escalator Entrance**—this one is getting closer. Instead of popping straight up, he glides up from the back of the stage.
- **The Pogo-Stick Entrance**—this is where the puppet bobs up and down as it comes up.

All these entrances get the puppet on stage, but it won't appear lifelike and will detract from the performance. To do a proper entrance, think about how someone comes on a stage from floor level. They walk up a set of steps. So, in your mind, think about how you would walk up a set of three steps.

First, you move forward *slightly* while picking up one of your feet and placing it on the step. Then you drop down slightly and push up with your other foot. You move forward slightly, place that foot on the next step, and repeat the process. The motion of your upper body during the process is moving forward and up. Then there is a *slight* drop as you push off the step and then forward and up again.

Now, let's move to the puppet. Hold the puppet in the proper position, as stated before, at shoulder level towards the back of the theater. Slowly bring the puppet up and forward and then drop it slightly. Bring it up and forward and drop it slightly. Bring it up and forward and you should be on stage. For walking a puppet on stage, use three steps for a normal appearance and don't rush the movements.

The above description is used for a people puppet for the majority of its appearances. There are some exceptions. If a puppet is running on stage, keep the same motions but shorten them and speed them up. Occasionally a puppet may come on stage hopping, jumping, or skipping. We'll cover those entrances in the advanced puppetry section of the book.

If you have an animal puppet coming on stage, you still have the same goal to make it as lifelike as possible. Watch how the animal walks and then put the puppet on and imitate it.

A key practice is to make sure you are using the depth of the theater when bringing a puppet onstage. If the puppet is coming up from the side, make sure there is enough room so it can come up and forward without running into another puppet.

Walking the Puppet off the Stage

Once the puppet is finished, it's time for it to exit the stage. Remember the goal to make the puppet as lifelike as possible and do a proper exit. Bringing a puppet off the stage properly is a two-step process.

Step 1: Turn the puppet towards you with your wrist bent so it is looking down. I've often seen people turn the puppet away from them to bring it down. In doing so, they almost automatically

make the puppet lean to the side. It leans more and more with each downward step the puppet takes because our arms aren't designed to bend in the way needed for that exit. Remember; turn the puppet toward you so you are looking at it eye to eye.

Step 2: Bring the puppet forward (towards you) and down. Raise it *slightly*, bring it forward, and down. Raise it *slightly*, bring it forward, and down. Again, three steps are all you need.

During the course of our ministry, we've attended several professional puppetry workshops. At one, we not only received instruction and helps, but enjoyed a half-hour musical puppet production performed by the instructors. They taught us what to do and then demonstrated it before us. At the conclusion of the musical, the lights went off while the puppets were onstage. It wasn't totally dark so I kept on watching. Each of the puppets properly walked off the stage even though the majority of the audience wasn't paying attention. That spoke to me about the quality of the people doing the performance. They did everything right whether the audience could see it or not.

I left with a high regard for that team. They practiced what they preached. What would have happened if they had just dropped their puppets at the end? I wouldn't have had that high opinion of them—especially since it was the last thing I saw them do. I made a point from then on to have that same professionalism in all our performances and recommend that you do likewise.

Proper Puppet Positioning while Onstage

When your puppet is onstage, there are several things to keep in mind whether your puppet is talking or not. In fact, you should spend as much time as possible with your focus on your puppet to make sure it maintains proper positioning. This is more difficult with scripts than recorded plays, but you can do it with practice.

While onstage, your puppet needs to be high enough for the audience to see. To do that, the bottom of the puppet should be about two inches below the top of the theater. That keeps it up high enough without people being able to see your arm. If you hold the puppet too high and your arm shows, it ruins the lifelike illusion you're trying to create.

One of the things you need to be careful about is the dreaded "quicksand" patches that seem to infiltrate almost every theater. In the movies, when someone steps into quicksand, they slowly begin to sink out of sight. In puppetry, if you don't pay attention to your puppet, the same type of effect often occurs. As your arm tires, you slowly begin to lower the puppet until just the top of its head is showing. The normal response when someone realizes his or her puppet has dropped is to quickly pop it back up in place. The problem is that action causes the audience to turn their attention to that puppet and they may miss something important in the play. If you find yourself in that position, *slowly* raise it back up again. But the ideal is to keep an eye on your puppet so that it doesn't sink.

Another thing to guard against is leaning the puppet on the stage. This usually occurs when the arm is tired or you aren't paying attention to the puppet. The puppet should be held at least three to four inches away from the stage. This helps give a proper appearance and gives room for arm motions and body movement.

When two or more puppets are onstage talking with each other, it is important that they maintain eye contact with each other. Don't look at the audience while talking with another puppet—look at that puppet. You can glance at the audience now and then, but keep your focus...

Tip for working a puppet in a classroom without a theater:

If you are doing a two-person play between the puppet and yourself, try to maintain active eye contact with the puppet as you talk.

But, instead of doing the play as something the children watch, involve them as well. Have the puppet ask the children a question. Ask the children for suggestions on how to help the puppet if it is struggling with something.

When the puppet talks with or to the children, have it look at them and you do the same.

By doing this, active learning will take place, but there is another reason. If you spend a large amount of time without making eye contact with the children you will tend to lose their attention.

CHAPTER 12

Team Positions and Roles



Being part of a puppet team is fun and rewarding. It gives you a chance to minister and educate and provides an opportunity to develop great relationships with others who share your passion for puppets. Over the years, many of our closest friendships have been built with individuals on our puppet teams.

For this chapter, we'll take a look at the various positions on a puppet team including their qualifications and responsibilities. (NOTE: This book is written primarily for Christian puppet teams, so spiritual elements are included in each description.)

The Puppet Team Director's Qualifications

The director is the leader of the team and as such is responsible to God for the team. Each member is responsible for his or her own actions, but the director is accountable for the team as a whole. With that in mind, there are some key qualifications to consider.

1. Needs a personal relationship with God.

This relationship comes through Jesus Christ by receiving Him as personal Lord and Savior.

2. Should be spiritually mature and dedicated to God's work.

Directing a puppet team takes commitment and the ability to press on when things get tough. The director is the role model for the rest of the team and should live and use the principles taught by the team in their own life. After all, when it comes to teaching and imparting truths, more is caught than taught. In other words, actions speak louder than words. To effectively communicate spiritual truths and character traits, the team needs to live what they teach which starts with the director.

The director also needs to ensure that the plays used are biblically correct. Just because a play was written by a believer doesn't automatically mean it is biblically sound or accurate. We once had a recorded play where the author was trying to convey the importance of living a godly life by asking the question, "What would Jesus do in this circumstance?" The premise was great, but as I listened to the play, I realized we couldn't use it. In the play, one of the characters did something wrong and tried to get his friend to help him escape the consequences...

CONCLUSION



I hope that this book has been a help to you in your puppet experience, whether you are just starting out or have been active in puppets for a while. There is more I could write, but then the book would never get finished.

I have enjoyed our puppet experience up to this point and want to thank you for letting me share it with you. It has had many ups and downs, but has been well worth it. God has used our puppet experience to touch hundreds, even thousands of lives over the years and for that we praise God. We couldn't have done it without Him. When I look back at what God helped us accomplish in the last 25+ years I wonder how we did it. The only answer is because of God's grace and empowering ability. He wants to do the same and more for you. I look forward to the rest of our puppet experience in the coming years, to see what God has in store for us. I also wish for you a great Puppet Experience.

Tim Brown
Isaiah 40:31