

BASIC TECHNIQUES OF PUPPET MANIPULATION

Puppet Director's Handbook

Puppet Productions Inc.

Be sure that your puppeteers know the correct way to hold their puppets. Insert one hand through the body of the puppet and into the mouth. Your hand should feel comfortable with four fingers in the roof of the mouth and the thumb in the jaw below. Both the fingers and the thumb should be touching the cloth-covered mouth.

Correct mouth action is necessary in good puppetry. Synchronize the opening of the puppet's mouth with the spoken word. Avoid moving the mouth at random during a sentence. Do not open the mouth all the way with each word. Save the wide openings for exaggerated or loud expressions. Practice opening the puppet's mouth by moving your thumb downward without moving your fingers upward.

Eye contact is very important. Remember to look at the audience regularly. If your stage is elevated, you will want your puppets to look down a little more than usual. This will ensure more effective eye contact with your audience.

If you want your puppet to appear natural, good posture cannot be ignored. To achieve this, the puppeteer's arm must be held at right angles to the floor and the hand held level. This position requires a firm yet relaxed appearance when done correctly. Do not allow puppets to lean from side to side nor lean on the stage. Poor posture is annoying and will detract from the show.

The puppet should never appear or disappear suddenly. In order to make your puppet enter and exit correctly, he must appear as if he or she is walking up or down a flight of stairs. This movement uses the whole arm and requires the puppeteer to keep his forearm straight up and down while the wrist remains relaxed. Using a fluid motion, the puppeteer moves forward as he "bounces" the puppet onto the stage. With each bounce of the arm, the puppet comes more fully into view. When the puppet leaves the stage, this process is reversed. Simply nodding the puppet's head, as he enters or exits, is not sufficient to give the impression of stairs. Walking across the stage is similar to entering and exiting. The puppeteer makes short, brief bounces without raising or lowering the average stage level of the puppet.

MANIPULATION OF RODS

Beginning puppeteers should use only one arm for gestures. Let the other arm hang limp. When your actions have become smooth and you are comfortable in performing, try shifting from one arm to the other by gently dropping one rod and picking up the other. Practice this method until you are confident in your moves.

VOICE CHARACTERIZATION

One of the most important factors in a live puppet show is the proficiency of the puppeteers in their voice characterization. The voice of a character does much in establishing exactly what sort of personality he has. In fact, the sound of a character's voice is so important that many people earn a living by supplying special voices for cartoons, commercials, radio dramas, and documentaries. Voice work is something which requires determination, concentration, and a lack of inhibition. One must get rid of the feeling of self-consciousness before he or she can become proficient in voice characterization. The first step in beginning voice work is study - not of books,

but voices. This process will help you to see that, with only slight variations, many different voices are possible. It will also help you to learn the different ways of altering a voice.

The human voice is capable of a staggering number of different sounds. This ability is what makes voice characterization possible. You must learn to combine these different sounds together in order to be successful. Remember that “practice makes perfect.” It is also important to note that it is not necessary to affect your voice so much that no one recognizes it as yours. You can rest assured that Mel Blanc’s close friends and relatives can pick his voice out of a crowd. This will probably also be true for you. The test is not whether anyone can recognize you, but rather whether the voice is believable. Listed below are various ways in which you can alter your voice.

METHODS OF VOICE ALTERATION

Pitch: By raising or lowering the pitch of your voice, the gender (male or female), age, or relative size and strength of the character can be altered. Remember that the entire tonality of the voice must be adjusted and that the normal variances in pitch which accompany everyday speech must be maintained in the new voice.

Quality: The quality of the voice is that which demonstrates the difference between people. Line up any group of people, and you will find that the main part of their voice which separates them from everyone else is the quality. The quality of the voice is the underlying tone. Some examples of different qualities are:

NASAL-Running all the sound through the nose. Try to keep a minimum of air from escaping through the mouth.

STUFFY-Running all the sound through the mouth. Try to keep a minimum of air from escaping through the nose.

BREATHY-Using much more air than normal in the pronunciation of each word, as though trying to blow out a candle while speaking.

WHEEZY-Using much less air than normal in the pronunciation of each word. Requires constriction of the throat during speech.

GRAVELLY-Extremely throaty pronunciation. This variation can be painful if used for an extended period. Requires rasping of voice.

CLEAR-Use normal air flow and throat.

Pronunciation: Differences in locale, personality, apparent intelligence, mood, or ethnic origin are all established by the pronunciation of the words. For example, you would slur the speech of a character whom you intended to be recognized as one lacking intelligence, while an inventor/genius-type character would be presented with a highly articulate speech pattern. Characters from foreign lands should, by rights, have an appropriate accent. NOTE: If you have trouble doing accents properly, it is best to stay away from them. Some examples of different pronunciations are:

SLUR-Tying words together while de-emphasizing ending consonants. Gives character a lazy or uneducated sound.

ARTICULATE-Distinct separation between words and accented final consonants. Gives character a nit-picking or intelligent quality.

DRAWL-Slow delivery of vowel sounds. Emphasize pitch variations on vowels. Gives character a “country” or a Southern sound.

ADVANCED MANIPULATION

The most important aspect of advanced puppetry is subtlety. For a movement to look real, it must be controlled. Unnecessary motions must be gotten rid of. Make small, subtle movements. Some things that should be weeded out are:

1. Nodding when you have nothing to say. There is a tendency for those puppets who are not speaking to nod in agreement with the speaker. This has to go.
2. Too much turning of the head while speaking. Many puppeteers feel that looking over every person in the audience during each word their puppet says is a must. It isn't. It's bad puppetry.
3. Getting hold of the rods and not letting go. It isn't necessary to hold both rods all the time during a performance. It's better puppetry to let them go and re-grip them when needed. This helps to avoid continual use of the hands, which can be a distraction.

You will find that most of the subtle techniques are body or head movements. Things can and should be done to give the impression of an entire moving body, not one that just moves from the waist up.

The Head

Because the facial features cannot be altered, it is up to the rest of the body to make expressions of emotion. Head movement is one of the most important techniques to master if you want an expressive puppet. For example:

- A quickly opened jaw, combined with a slow head turn, can imply surprise or disbelief.
- A slowly opened jaw, combined with a slow head turn, makes your puppet look as if it just had an idea.
- Tilting the head to one side means your puppet is puzzled or has a question.
- A full face take from where the puppet has been looking to the audience exhibits frustration, exasperation, or a plea for help in an unpleasant experience.

The Body

The body of the puppet is the part which must convince the audience that the puppet character does indeed have feet. After all, people do more with their feet than walk. We run, jump, kick, skip and many other activities. The secret here is the appearance of balance. The human body must compensate for foot movements, therefore, the puppet body must also.

- To jump, the puppeteer must lean the puppet forward as if prepared to jump, then swing his elbow so that the puppet is leaning back before landing.
- To kick, the same movement as a jump is required, but at a quicker speed and without moving the puppet very far.