

**Look Who's Talking: What Puppets have to Say**  
**Betty Carter, Jeff Casbeer, Kitty Fojtik,**  
**Janet Hughes, Stuart Ingram and Ellen Schlette**  
Houston Zoo, Houston, TX

***How are puppet shows effective?***

The three elements necessary for an effective puppet show must be in place before the audience sits down. These three elements are: preparation, practice, and imagination. It may sound very basic, but if only one of these elements is missing, your show will not be as effective as it could be.

**Preparation**

Know your message: Before putting a puppet on your hand and talking in a funny voice, you must be comfortable and familiar with what you're going to say. Read the script and discuss with the other puppeteers what it means to you. We've learned that each docent can find a different message in a puppet show script. By eliminating any confusion regarding the message to be communicated ahead of time, your delivery will ensure that the message comes through loud and clear to your audience.

Know your character: Is your character shy and timid? Is it loud and boisterous? How will you convey those characteristics with only your hand and your voice? How will you ensure that your hand and your voice are working in concert together? Take a moment to "become one with your puppet". Find the puppet's voice, mannerisms, and attitudes before you get up on stage so that you provide a consistent character to your audience. Often, the script of the show and the physical characteristics of the puppet can help define the voice, mannerisms and attitudes for you.

**Practice**

Once you are comfortable with your message and your character, it is time to practice the show so that you understand how the message is translated and how the characters interact with one another. As with any skill, the more practice you have the better your delivery will be. The first time you perform a particular show, it will most likely be structured and formal, lacking the flowing energy that enhances communication between you and your audience. It is wise not to make the first run-through an actual performance. We recommend running through a show as a "full-dress" rehearsal as many times as you can before premiering in front of your audience. We aim for a minimum of thirty minutes for set-up and rehearsal prior to the performance. Always try to have another docent in the "rehearsal audience" to provide feedback (Can they see the puppets clearly? Can they see things backstage that should be hidden? Does the puppet appear animated enough? Are puppets clumping at one side of the stage? Are puppets interacting convincingly with a narrator if applicable?) Given enough rehearsal time and tips from a docent audience, you will be more relaxed and in tune with what you propose to do at show time.

**Imagination**

This is where your puppet show takes off and becomes something special. Once you're familiar and comfortable with the message, the puppet and the show, you can start being increasingly more creative with your puppeteering. Entrances can be enhanced - perhaps instead of a puppet just popping up center stage, it peeks out first from around a corner, or maybe it enters humming a little tune, completely oblivious to the audience. Your puppet may start to develop a characteristic voice and specific mannerisms. The more imagination you put into your character and your show, the greater the spontaneity, the effectiveness of your program and the enjoyment of your audience.

So those are three essential elements to an effective puppet show: Preparation, Practice and Imagination. There are a few more technical tips to add to these general elements. We refer to these as, “THE TEN COMMANDMENTS OF PUPPETRY.”

1. I will become one with my puppet before performing a show.
2. I will think of clever ways to have my puppet enter (i.e. from the side, from above the stage, etc.)
3. I will always exaggerate an entrance or a departure.
4. I will use accents but only if I do them well and remember never to insult a cultural group with one.
5. I know that singing, humming and whistling work well.
6. I will have my puppet interact with others - it will look at other puppets when they speak; it will nod; it will shake its head. I shall always keep my puppet animated.
7. I will not assign first names to my puppets; rather I will simply refer to them as “Skunk” or “Toucan” so that I can avoid gender errors.
8. I will avoid reading the lines of the script. I will practice enough so that I can say the lines without “the reading sound” or sounding like a Stepford puppet.
9. I will always use a microphone for I know it is often too difficult for the audience to hear me without one.
10. I will have fun!

### ***Why should I use puppets at the zoo?***

A puppet workshop has been an integral part of docent training at the Houston Zoo for many years. Trainees are often disinterested, even resistant, at the thought of putting on a puppet show – “not dignified, silly, lame” are comments we’ve heard prior to our workshop. Sometimes it isn’t possible to handle a live animal (inclement weather; some hospital and other community outreach conditions are not conducive to live animal presentations) or the biofact you wanted for that lecture just went off on a zoomobile.

Our workshop trains docents to use puppets in a manner that entertains the audience and themselves while effectively getting across their educational message in either a formal or impromptu setting. We use humor in our training workshops, utilizing real bloopers that were “presented” to zoo visitors. Several veteran docents have been inspired to write scripts or present puppet shows.

Puppets have been educating and making people laugh for thousands of years. The education and the laughter go hand-in-hand. What we’re really doing with puppets is communicative play – it’s meant to delight and to be fun. The ancient shadow puppet art used in Turkey, China and India taught folk tales and histories to the masses when only the rich were literate. During the Middle Ages in Europe, wooden figures controlled with strings were used in church services to tell stories such as the Assumption of the Virgin and the Story of the Nativity. The name marionette, meaning “Little Mary,” is derived from these church puppets. Even the rowdy Punch and Judy shows that originated throughout Europe and Asia during the 1600’s encouraged the audience to think about social and political issues of the day.

Therefore, it’s no great stretch of the imagination to believe that puppets could effectively convey ideas such as conservation, biodiversity and the importance of the role of zoos to today’s visitors. According to a white paper on puppet language discovered on the Puppetools website ([www.puppetools.com](http://www.puppetools.com)), “The puppet-dynamic is evolutionary behavior unique to human play that attracts, harnesses, and mirrors the forces of consciousness inherent in brain process. In this little thing we prop up by hand outside the self, the workings of the mind become manifest in a symbolic language, a language that children experience as larger-than-life, a language they speak instinctively.” To paraphrase, people dig puppets! They get it and they have fun!

### *So what kinds of messages can puppets convey?*

Three different scripts are included with this paper to provide examples of the varied and popular puppet shows presented at the Houston Zoo. In the case of “Swamp Thing,” the messages are clear and three fold:

1. Characteristics of alligators are described in a fun, guess-what-the-Swamp-Thing-is format that keeps kids engaged.
2. The puppet stage allows us to discuss endangered species in an upbeat setting and to describe a success story with the recent comeback of the alligator and its subsequent de-listing.
3. Finally, we communicate a social lesson on rumors and what can happen when rumors are spread without factual backup.

The message in “The Same Backyard” may be a little more elusive to define. We believe that each audience member may take home a different message because when we discussed the show as puppeteers, we all had a different interpretation of the show. The chorus of the show sums it up nicely:

*“We’re all different, but special in our own way and we all live in the same backyard.”*

The Same Backyard communicates the idea of biodiversity and respect for others, not only in the animal world but also in our human world. That the different insects and bugs have jobs, favorite outfits and colors and other real-world responsibilities and attitudes helps us identify with them, perhaps remind us of some people we know. The Same Backyard talks about characteristics of creatures we’re all familiar with. Those characteristics that make each creature different also make it special. The value of the message is one of mutual respect. Animals and other people have a special place in the world no matter how different they may seem from us.

We can’t emphasize strongly enough the importance of audience interaction with your puppets. Whether it’s repeating a chorus, singing a familiar song or just answering questions posed by the puppets, interaction makes the show much more personal and, therefore, effective. During “The Same Backyard,” we often hear the audience expressing sympathy when cockroach hears that no one wants to come to his party. This is great feedback for puppeteers behind the stage – it indicates the audience is engaged in the show. And here in Houston, the cockroach doesn’t usually merit much sympathy!

Another popular show performed at the Houston Zoo discusses why zoo animals don’t make good pets. How often have you had to discourage zoo visitors from wanting to have one of our exotic animals as a pet? It’s a common theme that we all deal with. This show relates the zoo philosophy of keeping exotic animals through the eyes of a young puppet we have named “Little Johnny.” This puppet’s rambunctious, excitable character is a handful (pardon the pun) and kids immediately identify with him. One of the advantages to working with puppets is their freedom to be able to say and do all the things that we as docents and adults can’t. Through Little Johnny, children learn why zoo animals don’t make good pets (special habitat, nutrition, and health care needs) and that there are lots of cats and dogs in shelters that need someone to care for them. It’s a message that comes across with a great deal of humor and we have found it to be very effective.

In summary, education with puppets isn’t a new idea. Puppets have been used throughout history to convey stories and information in a fun, dramatic, and engaging way. The messages you can convey are limitless and can hit upon the zoo themes we’re all familiar with, as well as social values.

***Do I have to have a fancy stage to use puppets?***

You don't have to have a fancy set-up to use puppets effectively. We all know it's possible for puppets to talk right out there on the end of our hand, but we've been trained to think of puppets as needing a traditional stage. Puppets no more need a stage to talk than you or I do. The Broadway production of "The Lion King" makes extensive use of puppets with the puppeteers in full view of the audience. Although this production has a budget slightly higher than the average zoo puppet show, it illustrates that a puppeteer doesn't have to be hidden away from view in order for a puppet to be effective. There is no denying that the production of "Lion King" has been successful. The fourth script attached to this paper is entitled "The Wolf Returns to Yellowstone." This show is typically done without a stage. The puppeteers sit around a large table and use the table as their stage. We don't try to be ventriloquists and not move our lips because it doesn't really matter – the audience isn't looking at us, they're looking at the puppets!

In conclusion, all you really need is your imagination, a little preparation and practice to make puppets part of any decent activity.