



1995

"A Peg for Your Imagination: Puppets & Storytelling"

Rosemarie Howard

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cbmr>

BYU ScholarsArchive Citation

Howard, Rosemarie (1995) "'A Peg for Your Imagination: Puppets & Storytelling,'" *Children's Book and Media Review*. Vol. 16 : Iss. 2 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://scholarsarchive.byu.edu/cbmr/vol16/iss2/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by the Journals at BYU ScholarsArchive. It has been accepted for inclusion in Children's Book and Media Review by an authorized editor of BYU ScholarsArchive. For more information, please contact scholarsarchive@byu.edu, ellen_amatangelo@byu.edu.

"A Peg for Your Imagination: Puppets & Storytelling"

by Rosemarie Howard

Freelance Puppeteer and Storyteller

Have you ever wanted to run away to Australia, or live in a secret cave and be a powerful magician, or tell that mean old so-and-so exactly what you thought of them? Most of us, adults as well as children, have probably imagined these or similar things when life gets tougher than we'd like it to be. The arts offer us an imaginative, emotional, albeit temporary, escape from many of life's frustrations. Puppets, in particular, allow us to express things we might not otherwise say or do. For some, the word "puppet" conjures images of Jim Henson's popular characters—Miss Piggy, for instance; for others, it may seem like a word from a foreign language. One concise and catchy definition of a puppet is: "A peg on which to hang your imagination."

Puppets seem to have a universal appeal and are found in cultures all over the world—from Japan to Java, to Australia, to Africa, South America, Mexico, Europe, and the United States. Their use in religious rituals and ceremonies dates back to Greek and Roman civilizations. In the past 30-40 years puppets have become more widely used and accepted in the United States, not merely as entertainment, but as a tool in education and therapy. Puppets can be used in many ways—to discipline, to get attention, to teach a concept, to provide a group learning experience, and to role play. Puppets are especially useful in education as an aid or medium for telling stories.

Before we discuss a few specific ways puppets can be used to tell stories, let's define the main categories into which puppets may be classified. Within these main categories the ideas for creating a puppet are limited only by one's imagination.

Hand puppets are exactly that—puppets which fit over the hand in some manner, so that the hand literally gives them life. This category includes, but is not limited to, finger puppets, glove puppets, muppet (or moveable mouth) puppets, and sock puppets.

Rod puppets are built on or around a rod which the puppeteer holds to manipulate the puppet. Some of these puppets are very articulated, having moveable mouths, heads, and arms. Included in this category are wooden spoon puppets and stick puppets; shadow puppets are often classified as a type of rod puppet.

2 Brigham Young University

Shadow puppets are flat, cut-out silhouettes held with at least one rod against a semi-opaque white screen that is back lit. They may be made of leather, thin cardboard, wire, or colored gels. Hands also may be used to create a variety of shadow shapes.

String puppets are inanimate objects suspended from strings connected to a control device. These puppets, often called marionettes, may be as simple as a scarf or as complicated as a complex trick marionette.

Mask/body puppets are masks and/or costumes worn by actors who create the characters represented by the costumes. Disney characters, or Big Bird from Sesame Street, are good examples of this type of puppet.

Part of the fun of telling a story with puppets is choosing the right type of puppet—one that suits you, as well as the story you want to share. You may choose to make your own puppet, purchase a puppet, or bribe someone into making a puppet for you. Many times creating the puppet is so time consuming and engrossing, the creation process stops with the making of the puppet. In reality, after the puppet is finished, the creation process is only one-third complete. To complete the process, a puppet must be given a character, which includes voice and movement. Then, in most cases, some rehearsal must take place to assure that the puppet is used to convey the story material appropriately. Rehearsal, of course, would not occur in a free play or therapy situation.

If you choose to try making a puppet, two books containing simple and attractive ideas for beginning puppet makers are *The Muppets Make Puppets* and *Puppets*. *The Muppets Make Puppets* by Cheryl Henson and the Muppet Workshop, is a delightfully written book, full of colorful photo illustrations showing ways to make puppets from objects found in most homes. Also included in this book are ideas for creating character voice and movement. *Puppets* by Lyndie Wright (part of the Fresh Start series published by Franklin Watts) is another well-formatted book that shows in step-by-step photographs how to make a variety of simple puppets from easily obtained materials.

Now that you have a bit of background on puppetry and perhaps a puppet to work with, let's see how puppets can be used to tell stories in a variety of settings—homes, churches, schools, and libraries. The key to using puppets successfully in any situation is that the puppeteer believe in the puppet character(s) and allow himself to get into the character enough to "play" with the audience. It's hard to convince anyone of something you don't believe in yourself.

The following ideas for using puppets in storytelling in various learning settings are taken from personal experiences as well as the experiences of friends and students.

One teacher of four and five year old children in a church setting uses sock puppets in her classroom to help the children learn songs as well as to tell scripture stories. The children also role play real life situations using the puppets to help them understand and apply the principles presented in the lessons. If the puppets do not appear at some time during the lesson, the children want to know where they are. The puppets represent human characters such as a grandmother, a grandfather, a brother, sister, or mother.

The story of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* has been told effectively by a creative librarian using hand puppets made to represent each piece of food the caterpillar eats. As the storyteller relates how the caterpillar eats its way through the week, each item is hung on her arm. By the story's end this collection of items resembles a caterpillar; as the caterpillar becomes a cocoon, the items are quickly removed from the arm and a butterfly puppet is brought forth. Young children enjoy hearing the story told this way very much. One bilingual storyteller helped the children say the name of each food item in Spanish as well as English, as it was placed on her arm.

High school students staged a hand puppet production of Aesop's *The Grasshopper and the Ant*. The students made their own puppets and set, and a local musician wrote some clever tunes and lyrics, which were performed by the teenagers. The students not only learned about making puppets, but also about working together, being dependable, and presenting the finished product to an audience of family and friends.

For a puppetry class project, one college student prepared a shadow puppet presentation of the delightful story *Pierre, The Boy Who Didn't Care*. The student created a distinctive voice for each character and used some appropriate music behind his narration of the story. This production was successfully presented to groups of children in a library setting as well as in the student's home for a group of neighborhood children.

A creative fourth grade teacher presents a story to the children to show them how a puppet show is performed and then asks for their assistance to perform a well-known fairy tale, such as *The Three Little Bears* or *The Three Wishes*. He tells the story, allowing the children to speak the dialogue if they choose to and act it out with the puppets. They learn the sequence of the story, as well as how to manipulate a puppet and develop dialogue.

In a library storytime setting, three puppeteers presented the story of *The Three Pigs* with muppet-type hand puppets. As the story on the puppet stage ended, the wolf (an actor in a mask and costume) stepped from behind the stage and to the delight of the young audience, related the *True Story of the Three Pigs*. The pigs were represented by an actor wearing a snout.

From these few examples, it is easy to see that puppets, in all their variety, can effectively be used to tell stories in many learning settings to audiences of widely ranging ages and interests. So, find yourself some puppets, a good story

4 Brigham Young University

to tell, and an appreciative audience; learn as you let your imagination help you release some of life's frustrations.

Books to Consult:

The Muppets Make Puppets! by Cheryl Henson and the Muppet Workshop. Workman Publishing, 1994. ISBN 1-56305-708-5

Puppets by Lyndie Wright. Franklin Watts, 1989. ISBN 0-531-10635-7

Paper Masks and Puppets by Ron and Marsha Feller. The Arts Factory, Seattle WA, 1985. ISBN 0-9615873-0-X