PUPPETRY
HOW TO DO IT

Mervyn Millar

Foreword by Cheryl Henson

Contents

Introduction
Being a Puppeteer

This book is intended to allow you to feel comfortable making theatre with objects and puppets. It will teach you about what performers do when they're working with puppets, and will show you a simple way in to doing it.

It's a practical book. There are exercises in it. I use these exercises with both students and professional performers. I also use them (and similar ones) with playwrights, designers, businesspeople and whoever else is willing to ask me to work with them. They are (most of them) suitable for young people or vulnerable groups. The idea of these exercises is to allow people who know nothing about puppetry to do some. And to give those who are learning about puppetry the tools to find out more, as new and innovative ideas appear to them.

So you might use this book as a way of teaching a group about puppetry – your group might be children, adults, professional performers or committed amateurs. You might also use the book as a source of exercises to use in rehearsal when working towards a production. As with many teaching exercises, each one is designed to make the performer (or those watching)

more conscious of an aspect of the craft – which can be a key part of the process of finding out what makes your show tick.

This book is about the puppeteer, or the actor, or whatever you want to call the person manipulating the puppet. It's about how puppetry is similar to, and how it's different from, acting. A lot of my work has been with professional actors who have a short time in which to learn a bit of puppetry for a show. This book is about how not to feel confused or nervous about bringing a puppet out on stage, and how to feel confident about directing puppets. It's for actors and performers, and for directors and designers, for teachers and students and for groups who might want to explore puppetry in therapeutic contexts.[1]

It's in the nature of most of the exercises that they are for a group. While there are rare occasions when I've had the chance to coach someone one on one, they are unusual, and adaptations of the principles behind the exercises can be made. More likely, you have a group who you'd like to introduce to puppetry. Perhaps you are a teacher or a director. Perhaps you are a group of actors working together and who can take it in turns to be the 'leader'. Or maybe you want to use puppetry as a way to explore a bit of text or a play in an unusual way. Whichever way it is, most of the exercises require a leader, whose job is to say things: sometimes just to stop the room being too quiet; sometimes she will give instructions, sometimes encouragement. If you're being the leader, make it your job to think about what it's like for the participants. You're not there to test or examine them, you're there to give them nudges as they work something out for themselves.

I'm going to tend to write as if I'm addressing the group leader – although it may be that you are reading this as an individual

and it's you alone who are putting it together. Usually I'll be giving suggestions on how to interpret or praise the outcomes of the exercises, and suggesting how ideas might fit together into an understanding of the practice. But even if you are the leader, please see if you can try out the exercises yourself – even if it's on your own in your living room – because you will be able to relate much better to what the group are doing. Puppetry throws the focus of emotion into our physical proprioception; which is to say that we pay attention to the physical experience of emotional states, in order to then translate them into something for people to watch in the puppet. You need to *feel* it.

Rules

There aren't really any rules. You will find that I believe certain things to be true – for example, I believe that the puppet's life is more distinct (and the puppetry is easier) when the puppeteer is connected with his or her breath. But I am aware that there will be plenty of performance situations where this is not important and may even be counterproductive. The routes through these exercises will illustrate a personal, and inevitably biased, approach to puppetry – and you will discover and understand why I think certain things are a good idea. The ambition of this book is not to limit your idea of what puppetry is – it's to enable you to explore what it can be. I might spend all day teaching a thorough, detailed and understated puppetry scene – and then go and see a show (and love it) which is filled with chaos and wild abandon, and the puppetry is rough, messy and wonderful. Once your puppeteers have control of their puppets, what you and they do with them is unbounded – so together we shall try and gain that control.

The job of the director and performer in the theatre will always be to question received wisdom, and I encourage you to find your own way if you see an opportunity for something more vital and extraordinary to happen in front of you. Your stage is more important than my memories.

Puppets and Objects

I'm not going to teach you how to make puppets. It's possible that you'll work it out from what's in this book. But there are different books for that.[2] A puppet is an object. There's more to it (and there are academic books, too, in which we can discuss the detail of what defines a puppet) – but at the heart of it is this: a puppet is something that is not alive, that we pretend *is* alive. Puppets that you might have seen and enjoyed might have been beautifully designed and made, they may have had intricate and complex mechanisms or even animatronics – but at the most simple level, they were objects that were being manipulated to seem as if they were alive.

There is no type of performance a puppet can't do. Puppets can be intensely moving or hilariously funny. It's the puppeteer that makes them do it. If you can imagine it happening with the puppet, then it can happen. Don't believe people who tell you that 'Puppets can't do text' or 'Puppets are only good for comedy', or 'Puppets are just for kids'. If you want to do it with a puppet, you can find (or make) the right puppet to do it.

For this reason I'm going to try to teach you how to do puppetry without using any puppets. *You do not need to be able to make anything to use this book.* We will get hold of things – inanimate objects – and we will learn how to play with them and animate them for an audience. After a while we'll bend other things (like paper) into the shapes of people in order to

explore puppeteering a human character. You and your puppeteers should come out of the experience with a healthy understanding of what would make a good puppet, and the knowledge that it's their skill that makes the performance and the connection with the audience. This sort of confidence in their ability and technique should give them a clear respect for what a good puppet-maker can offer them – a tool that will bring their skills into focus for the audience and provide the perfect vehicle for the action.

Design in puppetry is, of course, an important thing. A well-designed puppet is compelling to watch and magnifies the puppeteer's work. A good puppet is a work of sculpture. A good design invites the audience to imagine a certain type of world and implies a whole lot of things about this character's relationship to it; a good design tells you about the background and personality of the character; a good design makes the puppet move in certain ways which make that character distinct and helps the puppeteer with his work. But the design is made for action, and without the puppeteer, the sculpture is inert and incomplete. The puppet is the passive centre of the fundamental relationship in performance between the puppeteer and the audience.

The Exercises

The exercises throughout this book are usually exploratory ones: we'll usually set up a character, and then invite the puppeteer to find out more about that character by exploring the room, a situation, or another character. Through this action, the puppeteer and the audience will discover what works and doesn't work in puppetry. Sometimes (especially later) the puppet will have a clear challenge to execute – these exercises take the same approach to discovering technique.

There is a lot of improvisation in the exercises. If your puppeteers haven't done much improvisation before, don't panic. These guided exercises will be a good introduction – the stakes are low and your calming voice can help them get out of sticky situations. Trust each other and don't let anyone lose heart (or lose face) if one impro doesn't go as you expected – there will be another one along in a minute. If the group like improvising, these exercises should not be the end of the explorations – get a book on improvisation and start trying those exercises with your animated objects.

The Format of the Exercises

The exercises sometimes have a little introductory paragraph, but if they don't need one I haven't put one in for the sake of it. Read through the whole exercise before you start!

- *Then they are written in bullet points.*

- *Most of the bullet points are there for the leader – it might be instructions on what you need to set up, for example, or something that you are looking out for. They're in italics, like this one.*

- Others are suggestions of what you might say. Use your own tone of voice, don't necessarily read mine out word for word.

- They will be broken up to remind you to let the exercise carry on for a bit.

- Remember they are indications and not a script.

- *Things may happen when you do the exercise that you need to respond to.*

- Know the exercise well and make it your own.

If you are a director or group leader, you might read the exercise instructions out at first, but once you have done them a few times, I hope you will deliver them in your own style.

They have no fixed length. You will be surprised sometimes how long you can let an instruction carry on for. Sometimes leaving the group without much information for a while can allow them to find a new relationship with the direction you've given them. You will probably find that some people in the group become bored (i.e. self-conscious) earlier than others. If their impatience starts to disrupt the concentration in the room, it's usually easy to guide them back into the exercise by offering a new suggestion to everyone. The participants who feel less engaged will be more likely to leap on the new idea. Otherwise, I would suggest you let the exercises run a little longer than your instincts suggest.

Most people, performers and non-performers alike, will try something safe first – by which I mean something that they have done before, or that they know will 'work'. Sometimes this thing will be very impressive, but it is likely to teach them nothing. It's when they have exhausted the potential of that first idea that they will try something that might not work – but which has genuinely emerged from the exercise itself. I don't think that there is a useful way to sidestep the first idea. It's part of our confidence-building process to find security at first. And it's good for you to know what your performers' reflex character is, and see who can really open themselves up as the exercise goes on.

You might find that you need to talk while people work on the exercises. The room can seem oppressive when it's silent. You might use music to help with this problem. If you are working towards a particular style of production, this might be very useful to unify and gently guide the group; although be

aware that it can have the effect of steering the content of the improvisation. So you might find that it's your voice that reassures them that they're spending their time valuably.

It's a common experience for the leader that they see participants who don't seem to be 'getting' the exercise. Perhaps someone didn't hear one of your instructions. Perhaps they are trying something other than what you suggested (and perhaps you should see what it is before steering them). Get used to repeating the guidance in different ways. Rephrasing the prompt without it sounding like a correction or criticism will also help you to understand what you really think is important in the exercise. And if you are relaxed about what happens, let people interpret your guidance loosely.

In many of the exercises, the 'audience' have a clearly defined role to offer feedback. The audience in this case is the rest of the group, where only one or two are performing. One of the themes of this book is that the performers and the audience are working together to make the performance. I hope this will become clearer as you work through doing the exercises. This will pay off the further you go – the informed and involved audience become brilliant guides for developing your work.

Patience is important. Really excellent puppetry requires rehearsal and painstaking problem-solving – and when puppeteers have a long-established security with their puppet, they can vary the action with extraordinary fluency. That patience in the puppeteer derives from patience in the director too. If you're in rehearsals it can be a frustrating time for a director – the puppeteers are not in complete control of their characters, timings and actions are out, rhythms are stumbling. Playing in low-pressure sessions with these exercises should help you understand the process by which puppeteers

get control first of the character, then of the scene and, through that process, of the puppetry technique. It's not useful to rush this process. Your trust in your puppeteers, and your patient support as they put together what needs to be both an emotional and technical performance, is essential.

It's actually not difficult to go from being a complete beginner to quite a good puppeteer. Getting really good takes time and experience. Good puppetry is much easier with confidence, but building confidence requires time, and benefits from repetition, support, and, in these exercises, a sense of not being scrutinised or assessed until you are ready. Early in Chapter One, the exercises are about working without an audience. It will be useful if you are able to give the participants the impression that they are free to make mistakes and do it wrong. The more things they try, the more likely they are to find something they enjoy. Later, when we put ideas in front of an audience, we'll be able to see what works and what doesn't – but it's beneficial to have lots of ideas at that point. So make sure there's time to play, and explore foolish and unlikely ideas.

The Theory

The theory should hopefully join up the thinking between the exercises. From the thinking comes a set of principles that hopefully fit together. I'll stop and try to join the dots periodically, but you should be able to read through smoothly. The book is split into sections. Chapter One looks at simple ways to get started – using sticks and objects manipulated on a table. This miniature stage is a great place to make discoveries. It's no coincidence that many theatre directors were formerly the impresarios of miniature tabletop theatres.

You can judge scale and intention, storytelling and composition easily. It might be that you continue to work at this sort of scale – it's suitable for a whole range of shows, from international touring to studio theatres and festivals. But I anticipate that some of you want to work on a larger scale and alongside actors.

The second set of exercises (in Chapter Two) will offer avenues to explore to investigate particular principles in more detail and set you more involving challenges.

Chapter Three is about complex puppets – by which I mean puppets using more than one manipulator. The complexity is to do with coordinating the puppeteers. We will use a very simple puppet made of paper to explore this technique. The principles can be extended and applied to other puppets, such as the *War Horse* horses or others that you will design. The development of your work will not be linear, though. You will hopefully find yourself then going back to the first two chapters to play with the simple things, which will illuminate and refine your work with the complex puppets. Likewise, if you are interested in working with 'simpler' or smaller puppets, the work with the larger figures will offer provocations about the level of subtlety and nuance you might try to get out of gloves, sticks or objects.

In Chapters Four and Five, where there are no exercises, I'll talk about the puppeteer as a presence on stage, and about how to use this work as a springboard to make your own work – which will hopefully include things that I can't imagine. There's plenty of advice in here that I wish I had followed myself in shows that I have worked on. Some of it is hard-earned.

Warming Up

Puppetry is a physical activity. Even moving a small object on a tabletop might require the puppeteer to be stretching, bending, crouching and kneeling. It is important to have a good stretch and warm up before you get involved in these exercises.

It's also useful for two other reasons. The approach to puppetry that we're going to take here draws on a consciousness of the physical body. Because puppetry very often involves the expression of thoughts as posture or as actions, we need to be alert to the physical sensations of (for example) guilt or joy. This is much easier if the body has been woken up before the session begins. When working with a script, we would probably 'read through' before we get it up on its feet. With the puppet (and therefore the puppeteer), the read-through would involve connecting with all of the physical sensations relating to the emotional action (which might be the unwritten subtext) of the scene. The emotions and the nervous system's brain-function express themselves throughout the body. A freshly warmed-up puppeteer finds it easier to connect.

In the same way, the warm-up serves as a psychological rinse, letting the performer feel in their body that any stresses of the outside world are to be set aside, and cleaning the slate of the body and mind for the exercises and scenes to be approached.

So do always do a warm-up before you begin work. I'd suggest starting with some breathing while the body settles into a neutral position, and extending the breath to fill the body – so that it swells and stretches it as the air rushes in. The out-breath brings us back down into contact with our weight, and allows the body to collapse down at the waist and hang. I use the breath cycle of inflation and collapse to explore these

positions of straining extension (inflated) and of looseness (breath fully out). Then work through all the parts of the body from the toes to the neck. Make sure the hips and legs are free to move, that the spine is flexible and the shoulders relaxed, and pay some special attention to the fingers. Invent a little stretch to develop your fingers' ability to move independently – balling and unrolling them, 'typing' or whatever suits. And work the face too – even though it's not the focus of our work as puppeteers, lots of resistance can hide in the set muscles of the face.

My work recently has increasingly involved voice, and I can't see how a good physical warm-up can exclude the breath and voice. Big emotional expression through the voice is a great analogue for what we are doing with the puppet. The voice takes your breath and makes it emotional (and enormous) in just the same way that we are going to do with objects. So clear the pipes as well, especially if you anticipate your characters speaking. By the end, the performer's body should feel mobile and slightly floppy – you want them to be awakened to the pull of gravity on their body and their muscular control over it.

The Space

Some of the exercises involve working on the floor. If your group possibly can, I would strongly recommend it. So it helps if the floor is not cold, hard concrete. And expect to give it a sweep before you start. Most people are surprisingly willing to spend a few minutes sitting (and crawling) around on the floor, as long as it's clean.

I really like starting with an exercise that involves working on the floor. It's a great leveller – it's mildly uncomfortable for everyone, but everyone participates.

Clothes

The group needs to be wearing clothes they can move comfortably in. We're not concerned with hiding puppeteers in these games, so we will see the person moving the puppet. Puppeteers do not need to be in black all the time – but you will probably find that the further you get into your work, the more you appreciate your group wearing muted colours that don't grab your attention. The technique of the puppeteer will help present the puppet away from them and give it more focus, but it doesn't help you if you're in bright orange. Similarly there's no need for hoods or face coverings. However, if you are making a show and decide that you want to use black clothes and face coverings, then make sure you rehearse with them, as they will change the way you can behave!

One thing you might want to invest in is some kneepads. Many of these exercises require crawling around on the floor and kneepads can be really useful. I'd use soft ones, many of which are very discreet and lightweight.

1 Bringing Things to Life

Puppetry – the act of pretending that an object is alive – is natural and instinctive. We take an object, move it as if it's alive, and provide it with thoughts and a voice. The object – behaving like a person, or an animal – lives through experiences that we don't, and might respond in ways we never would. Everyone does it as a child (and every parent does it too). The puppet is a safe way for us to experience thrills, adventures, romances and deaths by proxy. What we do in theatre is a refined version, and targeted at an audience, but the desire to imagine life in an object, and to help someone else imagine life in that object, is not hard to find.

Part One
Hands

Let's start out with an exercise.

This works well with a group – any size will do as long as there is enough space in the room. Everyone should do it, no one should be watching. (You can also do it alone.)

1a. Hand Animals

- *Do a little warm-up just to stretch out, wake up and get rid of tension.*

- Sit on the floor with enough space around you that you can move your arms around without hitting the next person.

- Relax.

- Lay one hand on the floor.

- Ignoring what the other people around you are doing, play a little with moving different parts of your hands. One finger, two fingers… move them about. Rest.

The brown paper puppet.

Talking to the Puppet or the Puppeteer

Be careful about when you talk to the puppet and when you talk to an individual puppeteer.

The puppeteers will enjoy it when you address the puppet. It's an implicit compliment suggesting that they've successfully made the impression of life. 'Puppet, why are you leaning off to one side like that?' is actually a note to only one of the puppeteers, but they escape being singled out, and you get to allude to the oddness of the visual image from the audience's point of view. 'Head puppeteer, you're pulling the puppet over to one side' makes the same point, but it's down to your

relationship with that participant whether you want to say it like that.

As with previous exercises, I find a combination of the collective and individual notes works. Occasionally someone needs to hear themselves singled out, perhaps if they are not getting into the right frame of mind for working together. When everyone is doing their best, it's often better to address the puppet.

This quick set of basics starts us off with some of our key principles: breath, focus and weight. Slip them in under the radar while the group are enjoying their new puppet.

Breathing

When you ask the puppet to breathe, hopefully the first thing that will happen is that the head puppeteer breathes. They may try to find some way to express it in the body. Frequently, all of the puppeteers try to join in. The brown paper puppet breathes best when the head puppeteer is subtly (or not so subtly) flexing the 'body loop' by raising and lowering their neck hand. The waist puppeteer needs to keep the waist solid and in position so that this movement can happen relative to a fixed point. So, only the chest breathes.

After a few experiments, you may want to guide your first team to this version of breathing. The alternative versions sometimes have no visible movement in the puppet, which will restrict the audience's ability to connect with it; or have the whole body moving, which dissipates the focus of the breath and makes it difficult to play both breath and tension (which you will want to do).

Although only one of the puppeteers is animating the breath in the body, it's essential that all three puppeteers breathe (and

4 The Puppeteer

The Puppeteer

When we're watching and directing puppetry, it's important to spend most of our time looking at the puppet. The puppet is the focus of the action and the story. But the status and activity of the puppeteer is the source of a great deal of anxiety, opinion and opportunity. The anxiety largely comes from the puppeteers themselves, but the opportunities are there for the writers and directors who are working with puppetry.

This chapter doesn't have any exercises. It's some thoughts and reflections about what your puppeteers are going to do on stage, and an opportunity for you to think about how you want to present your puppeteers as visible or as hidden, and what implications that brings to your show.

Visibility

As we develop our ideas for a show, we need to ask the question of whether or not we want our puppeteers to be visible to the audience. If you want to hide your puppeteers, it will have major implications for your set design and rehearsal. You will need to