PUPPETRY IN
ELEMENTARY EDUCATION

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Puppetry is an old and honored art form but by no means an archaic one. Far from being an anachronism, puppetry is as dynamic a means of aesthetic expression now as it ever was in the past. To children, puppets are never old-fashioned but one of the exciting and intriguing elements in their contemporary world.

More and more, puppetry is being used with amazing success by speech and reading therapists as well as school psychologists and guidance personnel. There are so many different kinds of puppets and so many diverse ways of working with them that puppetry can be used to advantage to meet any number of school and classroom needs. The values of such activities give opportunity to develop good speech, the study of narrative literature, imagination, and social growth. Some simple puppets can be constructed in almost a matter of minutes and with very little expenditure of classroom time. They can often help to make what might be a rather pedestrian lesson into a most exciting and memorable one. School children are capable of creating quite complex puppets and presenting puppet performances on a high order. The activities involved in the preparation of such full scale productions cannot help but range through a number of instructional areas. Art, literature, speech, reading, music, social studies, science, arithmetic, all can be integral factors in the preparation of a script, in the making of scenery, in the construction of the theater, and in the actual production of the play. All this is an addition to what puppetry can do as a motivation agent and as a release for those children whose inhibitions make it difficult for them to participate fully and freely in classroom activities.
Puppetry being an art form must grow out of originality and personal expression if it is to retain its vitality. No matter what the child, he must be given the opportunity to design and construct his own puppet and later use it in his own way in a manner appropriate to his creative ability. When classroom puppets and puppet productions are thought of in this way, puppetry can become, not only a popular and stimulating art activity, but a richly rewarding and many-faceted educational experience as well. Puppetry can present ideas with extreme simplicity and yet be effective. Imagination is the most important ingredient in bringing puppet ideas to life. The ingenuity and creative treatment of a simple but clever puppet can often have more appeal than the care and artistry evident in a more elaborate but traditional one.

Children who are making puppets begin to play with them long before they are completed, and it is not at all unusual to hear a second or third grader having a conversation with his puppet as he points in its features or glues on its hair. Most young children particularly only children have an "imaginary companion" at some point in their lives with whom they establish a comfortable relationship and who becomes a vehicle for animated conversation and creative play. Almost invariably the child in his interactions with his companion speaks and acts with a freedom he finds hard to master on his own. In an accepting classroom a youngster can find this same freedom to express himself spontaneously and wholeheartedly through a similar identification with his puppet.

In the primary grades puppetry is always most effective when it is seen as an aspect of dramatic play rather than creative drama. Dramatic playing is "being" and becomes an expansion of the child's
environment. When this attitude is taken, it is possible to take advantage of the child's unabashed identification with his puppet and the liberating influence of this relationship. It is important not to get ahead of the child's creative development by involving him in puppet plays in which the demands of the production become more important than the unique contribution of the individual. Puppetry is only successful in the early grades when it is seen as an uncomplicated activity geared directly to the enthusiasms and abilities of the younger child.

In the intermediate grades puppetry is most effective as creative drama. The child must transform himself into the character he is playing. This type of direct involvement does not come easily to all children. In puppetry the child plays his role through an intermediary—his puppet and experiences a sense of security by being physically removed from the stage and able to watch his own performance. This security enables even the shyest child to express himself freely and with vigor and originality. In this form of drama the dialogue and action are created by the performers with little stress on reality. Puppetry can be used for narrating personal experiences, increasing self-confidence, and developing critical thinking.
II.

There are three basic types of puppets: (1) stationary, (2) rod, and (3) hand puppets. Stationary puppets are the simplest to operate for they really need no operator. The puppet is placed on a stage where it remains without movement while the puppeteer can concentrate on the thoughts he is expressing. This type of puppet is suggested particularly for primary grades in early puppet dramatization. The teacher can also successfully use such a puppet to serve as a mascot or advisor for the room - one through which he gives directions. Such puppets can be transformed from decorating cars, bottles, balloons, boxes, branches, vegetables and many other items.

Rod puppets are operated by means of a rod attached to it often forming part of the puppet. The puppet is stiff and its movements consequently limited. The rod can be a tongue depressor, doweling rod, or any appropriate piece of wood. With the rod a large variety of puppets can be made as with a wooden spoon, rubber ball or a bar of soap. Any flat surface or three-dimensional object to which a rod can be attached is suitable. Joints can be constructed by using springs and adjusting the rods. Normally, the operator's head should be just below the level of where the puppet appears. The puppets can be made to operate from above to represent a cloud or a ghost.

Hand puppets are operated directly by the hand. A hand puppet consists of a hollow head to which is attached an empty cloth body opened at the lower end for the performer's hand. The form and life of the puppet is derived from the movements of the fingers and wrist which need to be flexible to obtain effective control. The character of the puppet is conveyed to the audience by appearance,
movement, and voice. The heads and arms need to be in proper proportion to fit the character. Even if the head is satisfactory in itself, the effect is spoiled if it looks too large or small for the body. Movement is vital. During a performance every movement must be intentional and have significance to be clear to the audience which puppet is talking. There is an endless variety of types of hand puppets. The most familiar is the sock puppet but also paper bag, vegetable, balloons, box, rag-doll, and paper-mâché.
III.

It is not necessary to have an elaborate or expensive puppet theater. Function is the chief objective. Puppet stages have two acting areas: (1) where the puppets appear and are seen by the audience, and (2) where the invisible puppeteers move about and control the puppets. Stages may be classified as temporary and permanent. Temporary stages are the easiest to construct. Examples are: (1) the surface of a table with a cloth draped over it which is most suited for stationary puppets, (2) a board placed across the top of two chairs with backs facing and a blanket draped over the board, (3) a table turned on its side with the top facing the audience with the puppeteers crouching behind operating the puppets from below, and (4) a curtain drawn across the bottom half of a doorway.

Permanent stages refer to those which are not quickly improvised and are stored for future uses. The most widely used is the three-fold screen constructed out of wood or another durable material. The proscenium is cut in the upper part of the middle section. The two side sections are arranged at an angle to hide the puppeteers from view who operate the puppets from a sitting position below the level of the bottom of the proscenium. Another commonly used stage is one made of a cardboard carton painted on all sides after the top has been removed for lighting purposes. Part of the bottom of the box can be cut out for an opening through which the puppets can be operated.

Scenery for these stages can be painted, drawn, or attached to the front of the stages or be provided on a backdrop. It must be simple enough so it does not "take the show away from the puppets." As a rule it should be suggestive rather than realistic and be
proportionate. The stage must have a curtain - otherwise the magic of "curtain going up" is sacrificed. Curtains help create the atmosphere of fancy or a world that is not common place. A front curtain to draw is an asset. It gives the young manipulators time to arrange the next scene and adds to the enjoyment of the audience. There is a certain mystery about what is going on behind the curtain and anticipation about what is going to emerge.

Also important is provision for lighting the scenery. The first function of lighting is to make everything on stage visible except parts intentionally to be left in shadow. The second function is to vary the atmosphere and change the mood to match the development of the play. The lighting should be from above and in front of the stage avoiding shining it into the eyes of the audience.
IV.

Shadow puppetry is one of the oldest forms of puppet entertainment. There are only four necessary elements to produce a shadow-show: (1) a source of light, (2) an object to display, (3) a screen to take the shadow, and (4) the audience. Traditionally, the oriental shows used hanging oil lamps for mysterious effects of the flickering. Almost any source of light will work preferably of 100 watts or more and concentrated on the screen placed at a distance behind the screen. The operator is on the back of the screen; the audience on the other. The operator sees the back of the figures; the audience sees the shadows.

When a simple silhouette is desired the object must be cut out of some thin opaque material as wood, card or metal. Color is added by adding colored acetate or tissue behind holes cut out where the color is desired. An over-all glow is obtained by simply coloring the source of light. The shadow object can be moved around by use of a vertical or horizontal rod support of thin wood or stiff wire. Figures operated from above the screen usually have thin threads to support them. Joints and movable parts can be secured by overlapping sections of the figure and using paper clips.

The screen needs only be a supported frame covered with some semi-opaque colorless material as lampshade vellum, muslin, cotton sheeting, or onion skin paper. The screen is erected at right angles to the light source and usually clamped on to a table or other firm base. "Properties" must be designed to interfere as little as possible with the action of the figures. The scenery is leaned against the back of the screen or attached to
the frame. The operators, being hidden, work from the side or below the screen. The dialogue should be impromptu and apt as in any puppet show but spoken by the manipulator of the character speaking. Any age level can respond to shadow puppetry. The choice of plays is largely influenced by age group, skill of the manipulators, and the kind of audience to which it will be presented.
I decided on this type of project for the practical, worthwhile experience it would render me. My field is elementary education, and the only way to understand children and their actions and reactions is to work directly with them. The project proved beneficial not only to myself but to the children and other students as well.

Making the puppets was the first step. There were twenty-one representing the three types of stationary, rod, and hand puppets. This included the puppets necessary for the play, "Tar Baby."

I also constructed two stages, one I call a personality box, and the other a permanent stage. The personality stage, made from a cardboard box, rests on the head of the puppeteer, while he works the puppets on his hands stuck up through holes in the bottom of the box. To make the stage simply cut out the top of a box to allow for lighting of the stage, cut a proscenium out of one of the sides, and cut two holes in the bottom large enough to put hands through. To remain "invisible" while working the puppets, fasten gauze or cheesecloth around the bottom and drape the material over the shoulders. Each student can make his own theater and then put on series of one act plays. The acts need to be short because it is hard for children to keep their arms above their heads for any long duration.

The permanent stage was a three-sided stage made out of building board which is more appropriate than plywood. The building board is lighter and easier to handle for one person (the teacher). It is also more reliable for attaching the curtains and decorations which can easily be added with staples or pins.
As every stage should have a curtain for opening and closing the action, I constructed a draw-string curtain and added a movable backdrop to "hide" the puppeteers.

After having built the equipment and props, I worked with a group of intermediate elementary students. After a week of rehearsing to prepare the script and scenery, they presented the play, "Tar Baby," to a college speech class. The script was prepared in the original Uncle Remus dialect which the children very deftly imitated. Each character of the play was operated by one student but spoken by another. This seemed to be easier although this required more concentration in co-ordinating the movements with the voice. The students were pleased with their presentation and enjoyed working with the puppets.

Another portion of this project was working with a group on shadow puppetry. The play "Chanticleer" was chosen and presented to several nursery school classes. The response from the children was tremendous. The group working with this play were amazed at the response and learned just from this one experience the value of puppetry and how profitable it is when used with children in and out of the classroom.

I feel satisfied with the project. The experience working with the children and puppetry will be of great value to me once I have joined the ranks of the teaching profession and am in my own classroom.
ROD
1. soap
2. clothespin
3. handkerchief
4. wooden spoon
5. stick and paper

STATIONARY
1. balloon
2. tin can
3. paper cup
4. box
5. egg shell
6. stuffed sock
7. spool

HAND
1. paper sack with paper plate
2. sock
3. tin can
4. box
5. light bulb
6. finger
7. folded paper-dog
8. paper maché
PERMANENT STAGE

Back view with Draw-string Curtain
Brer Rabbit and Brer Fox were always out to get each other. Brer Rabbit always fooled Brer Fox. Brer Fox became very tired of this and made up his mind to find a way to catch Brer Rabbit and eat him. One day Brer Fox found a lump of tar in the road. He looked at the tar and thought:

"This is jest what I need to help me catch Brer Rabbit. I shall make a tar-baby."

Brer Fox went to work and mixed some tar with some turpentine and made him a tar-baby. He made a big ball of tar for the body. He made another ball for the head. Then Brer Fox put on arms and legs. Last of all he put a hat on Tar Baby's head. He didn't have to wait long. By and by here come Brer Rabbit down the road. Brer Fox he lay low. Brer Rabbit came prancing along till he spy the Tar Baby. He was very much surprised.

"Good morning. How are you?"

Tar Baby ain't say nothing and Brer Fox he lay low.

"Nice weather this morning."

Tar Baby she ain't say nothing. This made Brer Rabbit very angry.

"How you come on then? Is you deaf? If you is I can holler louder. You're stuckup, that's what you is, and I'm goin to cure you."

Brer Fox off in the bushes chuckles but Tar Baby ain't say nothing.

"I'm goin to learn you how to talk to respectable folks if it's the last act I ever do. If you don't take off that hat and tell me howdy, I'm goin to bust you wide open."

But Tar Baby jest stays still and Brer Fox he lay low. So Brer Rabbit drew back h's fist and hit Tar Baby. His fist stuck and he couldn't pull it loose.

"If you don't let me loose, I'll knock you again. Turn me loose before I kick the stuffin out of you."

Brer Rabbit got so angry that he hit Tar Baby with his head and it stuck, too. Brer Fox saw now that Brer Rabbit was stuck and couldn't get away so out he walked.
Brer Fox: "Howdy Brer Rabbit. You look sort of stuck up this morning. I expect you'll take dinner with me this time and I done laid in some calamus root. I expect I got you t'is time. Mayb', I ain't but I expect I is. You been runnin around here sassing me a mighty long time, but I expect you done come to the end of the row. Who asked you to strike up acquaintance with this here tar-baby? There you is stuck up there and there you'll stay till I fixes up a brush pile and fires her up. I'm goin to Bar-B-q you this day!!!!!

Uncle Remus: Brer Rabbit began to think very fast.

Brer Rabbit: "I don't care what you do with me, Brer Fox, so you don't fling me in that Brier patch. Roast me, Brer Fox, but don't fling me in that brier patch."

Brer Fox: "It's so much trouble to kindle a fire I expect I'll have to hang you."

Brer Rabbit: "Hang me jest as high as you please, Brer Fox, but don't fling me in that brier patch."

Brer Fox: "I ain't got no string. I expect I'll have to drown you."

Brer Rabbit: "Drown me jest as deep as you please, Brer Fox, but don't fling me in that brier patch."

Brer Fox: "There ain't no water righ. I expect I'll have to skin you."

Brer Rabbit: "Skin me, Brer Fox, snatch out my eyeballs, tear out my ears by the roots, and cut off my legs, but please don't fling me in that brier patch."

Brer Fox: "So you don't want to be thrown into the brier patch. That is jest where I will throw you!!!"

Uncle Remus: That's jest what Brer Fox did. He snatched Brer Rabbit up by the behind legs and slung him right in the middle of the brier patch. As soon as Brer Fox let go of him, Brer Rabbit started laughin. Brer Fox waited around to see what would happen. By and by he heard someone call him from away up the hill.

Brer Rabbit: "Ha! Ha! You won't eat me today. I was bred and born in a brier patch, Brer Fox. Bred and born in a brier patch!!"

Uncle Remus: With that he skipped out as lively as a cricket for he had fooled Brer Fox once again.


7. Walters, Maude, Puppet Shows, N.Y., Dodd, Mead Co., 1937.