

NATIONAL PUPPETRY MINISTRY TRAINING AREA (MTA)

Hints & Tips for Participants

➤ **THE PROGRAM**

The play should present biblical truths or Bible facts accurately. If the purpose of the play is evangelistic, it should present the gospel clearly and in a serious manner. The play should teach the audience something accurate about a Bible truth (giving, sharing, heaven, etc.); or it should inspire or encourage the audience to a specific action (children obeying, faithful to witness, faithful to read the Bible and pray, etc.); or it should teach the audience something accurate about a Bible character (Jonah, Samson, Gideon, etc.). If presenting a Bible character, the Bible character should seem realistic and not be portrayed as a simple bum bling fool making frivolous statements. The play should be entertaining and appealing as well as informative.

➤ **THE PLAY INTRODUCTION**

Care should be given as to the appearance of the person making the introduction and the material contained in the introduction. The remarks should explain the theme of the play, and prepare the audience to understand what is happening the minute the play begins. There is nothing worse than to sit and watch a puppet play and know nothing about it until one-half to three quarters of the way through. A puppet play was recently performed at the conclusion of a Children's Christmas program. The title of the play was "Songs of Christmas," by Puppet Productions, San Diego, California. It was a play about a Saturday children's Christmas program rehearsal the day before the performance. The introduction went something like this, "As you know there is much work and planning that goes into a Christmas program like the one you just saw. One of the things that make the program run so smoothly is the practice held yesterday. However, the practices seldom run as smoothly as the performance. As a matter of fact we would like to show you what a typical Saturday Christmas program practice looks like. We hope you enjoy the play, "Songs of Christmas." The audience knows what to expect and there is no need to try and figure out what in the world is going on.

➤ **CONTROL OF THE PUPPETS**

- a. *Puppet Appearance* – The appearance of the puppets should be neat and sharp. If costumes would enhance the performance, then they should be used. Hair and clothing should be in place, and overall appearance should be attractive and complement the play being performed.

- b. *Posture and Height* – The posture of the puppet is important if the puppet is to be seen as realistic. The puppet should not be leaning to the left or right, or leaning forward or backward. It should be held straight and in proper relationship with the front of the Puppet Theater. The height of the puppet is important in the performance of the play. If held too high, the arm of the puppeteer will show and the puppet looks out of proportion. If the puppet is too low, all the audience sees is the head or top of shoulders. The puppeteer also needs to be aware of the level on which his audience is seated. If they are lower than the level of the theater, then he needs to hold the puppet higher. If the audience is higher than the level of the theater, he needs to hold the puppet lower.
- c. *Control of Head and Eye Contact* – Eye contact should always be made with the individual or individuals to whom the puppet is talking, whether it is the audience, another puppet or a person outside the puppet stage. When looking at the audience, make sure you know their level of sitting. When not communicating, puppet's attention should be towards the focus of the play. However, never stare at one place or one person, unless called for in the play. 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.
- d. *Lip Sync* – Lip sync is the coordination of the puppet's mouth with the words being spoken. Mouth movement should be small if whispering or large if screaming or speaking loud. The mouth should open and shut with the words being spoken. It is not necessary to open the mouth with every syllable, but care should be taken not to "word bite." Word biting is closing the mouth instead of opening it when the puppeteer or tape is speaking.
- e. *Movement of Mouth/Head* – The mouth should be closed if not speaking unless it is being used to emphasize a specific emotion or reaction. When the puppet is talking the puppeteer should be able to drop the lower jaw of the puppet and not raise the top of the head (popping the top). People do not talk in this manner and neither should the puppet; it becomes very distracting when doing so. Each puppeteer should practice (without a puppet on) moving his thumb down without moving his fingers up. Another method, which helps in the proper execution of the mouth, is pitching the hand forward about 2 or 3 inches, allowing the thumb and fingers to move from closed to open position. It is like the action of flicking water off the ends of your fingers. This helps keep to a minimum the problem of "popping the top" on the puppet.
- f. *Entrance/Exit* – Entrances and exits should be made as though the puppet is walking up (entrance) or down (exit) stairs. Up and down movements should not be too extreme, no more than 8 to 10 inches, and forward movement to the front of the theater should take between 5 and 7 steps.
- g. *Control of Arms or Hands* – This would include the use of rod arms on puppets, or a gloved puppeteer's hand. Most rod actions will be done with only one arm at a time (as most people use only one arm at a time). The movements should match the character of the puppet in the play and reinforce the spoken words. They should enhance the communicative ability of the puppet and make the puppet "come alive." This area is judged on the frequency or infrequency of use and how well the arms or hands are used (smoothness and professionalism.)

NOTE: Puppet teams are encouraged to use two-hand puppets, as the control of puppet arms and/or gloved hands is one of the ten areas on which the puppet team will be judged (see sample judging sheet). Choose an appropriate play and appropriate puppets, as there will be a loss of points if using one-handed puppets.

- h. *Realism of Puppets* – A good puppeteer is one, which makes the puppet seem like a real person. It is a combination of proper eye contact; lip sync; mouth/head movement; posture; arm use; and most of all, confidence on the part of the puppeteer. This is not something you can work on as a separate practice but rather something that happens, as the puppeteer becomes proficient in his practice and ministry.
- i. *Pre/Post-Conduct of puppeteers with puppets* – The quality of puppetry goes beyond the ability to use a puppet behind a theater; it extends to the conduct before and after the presentation. The key item to remember is that the puppets used in the play are not to be seen before or after the presentation. If you want to have puppets to show to children after the play is done, then you may do so. If the desire is to convey a message and give the puppet a personality, then that puppet should never be seen outside the theater setting.

NOTE: The theater design used is one suggested by Puppet Productions, San Diego, California, in the book, THE PUPPET BOOK, by Bill Hawes, page 210. The reasons for its use are: (1) spacious room for puppeteers; (2) two different level performing tiers; and (3) ease in transporting because of its lightweight.

Questions? Contact:

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