

# GCSE DRAMA

## Puppet design

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Teaching guide: puppet design

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## Puppet design

### Introduction

Puppetry involves the animation of objects to tell a story or engage an audience. Puppets can take a range of forms, and the mechanics of the puppet vary depending on the techniques used and the effect that the puppeteer wishes to create. Watching a puppet is different from watching an actor and puppetry requires complex skills that are difficult to master. However, simple use of puppetry is possible, effective, and can invite the audience to engage with the onstage action in a different way.

### Activity 1: Exploring how puppets work

Puppetry is a varied art form and there are many different types of puppets used in different cultures around the world. Research different types of puppets, focusing on the mechanics of how these puppets work: how does the puppeteer control the puppet? Some forms of puppetry you could consider include rod puppets, hand puppets or string puppets. You could also look at contrasting puppet traditions, for example Punch and Judy or Bunraku and Kathakali. Puppet companies also provide a useful starting point, including Handspring Puppet Company and Royal de Luxe.

#### Way in

Puppets can be made from any objects you have available. As an introduction to puppetry, try making a puppet from found objects. Select an object and see if you can make it seem alive by making it move. What sounds might your object make? How does your object react to the other objects in the room? If you don't have objects available, you can even pull your sleeve over your hand to make a simple sock puppet and experiment with that.

### Activity 2: Exploring how puppets communicate.

Find footage of different puppet performances online. Compare these different performances and consider the ways that a puppeteer uses a puppet to communicate with an audience. What features of the puppet are important in communicating with the audience? Can the puppeteer give the puppet emotions? Do you watch the puppet or the puppeteer or both? How can an

audience make a connection with a puppet? How is watching a puppet play a character different to watching an actor play a character?

#### Practitioner perspective

'I think when you as an audience surrender to the puppets, the idea that you're watching people play a horse goes away. Your imagination has got to be involved. It's a very creative act, and it's very satisfying.'

Adrian Kohler, co-founder of Handspring Puppet Company, on the puppets for *War Horse*

©Handspring Puppet Company



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### Discussion ideas

- When and how can puppets be used in performances? Are there certain times when puppets are (or aren't) suitable?
- Where could a puppet be used in the play or devised piece you are working on? Why?
- How important is it for a puppet to be life-like? What makes a puppet seem life-like for an audience?

Watch a puppet performance (either live or on YouTube) and think about how the puppet interacts with the actors on stage. What is the relationship between the puppet and the puppeteer? Who do you find draws your attention most: puppet or puppeteer? Why?



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### Activity 3: Shadow puppets

Use a simple story or scene as a starting point to create shadow puppets. Decide on the characters or settings needed for the story and cut shapes to represent them from stiff card. Attach a straw (or similar rod) to the shapes and hold them in front of a light source in a dark room. Moving the shapes or altering the distance or quality of the light source will create different effects, particularly with scale. Make the puppets more complex by using paper fasteners to make joints or by adding intricacy to the cut-out shapes. You can also string up a sheet to give yourself a good surface for your shadows.

### Professional example: Handspring Puppet Company

Handspring Puppet Company is a South African puppetry company who produce their own puppet performances and work in collaboration with companies across Europe, America and Africa. In 2007, they collaborated with the National Theatre to create the puppets for *War Horse*. In *War Horse*, a range of puppet techniques were used, including large scale horse puppets that could be ridden by the actors.

Handspring see puppetry as a place where fine art and performance meet, and they state on their website that 'the artistry of the performing object has always been a priority for the company'.

©Handspring Puppet Company

Examples of Handspring's work can be seen below, and on the next page.



©ShirlaineForrest/GettyImage

### Activity 4: Shirt and plate puppets



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A simple puppet can be made from a long-sleeved shirt and a paper plate. Sit cross-legged on the floor and hold the shirt in front of you. With one hand, hold the paper plate above the neck of the shirt to make a head. You will use this hand to move the puppet's neck and head. With your other hand, hold the cuff of one of the shirt sleeves. You will use this hand to move the puppet's arm. Experiment with moving the puppet, testing what the puppet can do. Try to give the puppet emotions: draw a simple face on the paper plate and match the puppet's movements to the emotion on its face. The puppets can be made more complex by working in groups of three, where one person controls the head and neck, one person controls the right hand and one person controls the left hand. Larger groups can also be used: attach a pair of trousers to the hem of the shirt using an elastic band and add more people to control the legs. Experiment with walking and sitting down or with more complex movements like dancing or falling over.

### Find out more...

- National Theatre puppetry resources:  
[nationaltheatre.org.uk/file/2156/view](https://nationaltheatre.org.uk/file/2156/view)
- Royal de Luxe gallery:  
[royal-de-luxe.com/en/pictures-wall/](https://royal-de-luxe.com/en/pictures-wall/)
- Handspring Puppet Company:  
[handspringpuppet.co.za](https://handspringpuppet.co.za)
- Indigo Moon theatre company:  
[indigomoontheatre.com/index.html](https://indigomoontheatre.com/index.html)

