

PART ONE: THE WHAT, WHY, AND HOW

Welcome to Threadbare Theatre

Threadbare Theatre was created four years ago after a lifetime of enthusiasm over puppetry that couldn't be contained any longer. The company consists of me, Mark Burrows, fellow (not to mention superior) puppeteer Ed Landwehr, and several other volunteers and puppet enthusiasts.

Why call it "Threadbare"?

Let's play a game. I'll give you three choices, and you pick the correct one.

- A. It's called Threadbare Theatre because we have a tiny budget, and it shows.
- B. It's called Threadbare Theatre because our puppet construction skills (particularly my sewing) are so iffy that there are bare threads everywhere.
- C. It's called Threadbare Theatre because we use found objects, and we're not really good at hiding that fact.

Yup, you got it. It's D. All of the Above. (Come on, you *had* to know that was coming.) To put it simply, Threadbare Theatre is low budget, has questionable sewing ability, and makes puppets out of what most would call "junk." So what's the appeal?

First of all, how many of us have more budget than we know what to do with? If you're a music teacher, there's new music and rhythm instruments to buy, workshops to attend, auditorium pianos to tune. And most of us already end up using some of our own money to pay for those things. Here's the good news—you can have an exciting, completely viable puppet theatre in your school where 90% of the materials needed are...



Not bad, huh?

Secondly, the secret to good puppetry isn't the puppet, it's the puppeteer. An imaginative puppeteer can do more with a wooden spoon than some can with an elaborate, store-bought puppet. At Threadbare Theatre, we find great satisfaction in making puppets. But the puppets are a means to expressing thoughts, ideas, and stories. The puppets aren't an end unto themselves—that would be sculpture, not puppetry. Besides, there's something reassuring, and even human, about the visible "flaws" in our puppets' appearances. We all have our own little threadbare patches. That's just part of the beauty of being human.

PART TWO: SCRIPTS

Developing Your Puppetry Script



I taught a puppetry class every Tuesday afternoon at a wonderful local art studio for children. It was pretty much a dream set-up. I had an assistant, access to all kinds of materials, and ten amazingly creative students. Early in the spring semester we learned that one of the students, Isabela, would be moving to Michigan in February. Isabela was a very funny and artistic student. Her move during the semester would be a loss. Beyond that, the class was preparing for an end-of-the-semester puppet show, and Isabela was bummed that she would have to miss it.

So here's what we did. During the script-writing phase, the students wrote a short show about a water-breathing dragon named Aqualine. We wrote the show in such a way that it could be read as a narrative by one person. We then emailed the script to Isabela in Michigan. Isabela's parents recorded her narration and sent it back to us. The class had time to practice with the recording and use it during the performance. So Isabela got to be a part of our show after all!

Writing puppet scripts is a lot of fun. You can do it. Your students can do it. Some things to keep in mind if you're going to have your students write a puppet script are listed just below. A handful of sample puppets scripts are provided after that, including two student-written gems.

Keep the script short. Most successful scripts lean towards the short side. I've seen some great two-hour shows, but even those were usually a series of short scenes that kept things moving. You always want the audience saying "More!" not "Less!" Besides, every line you write is a line you have to learn.

Less talk, more action. Puppetry is a physical art. In fact, some of my favorite shows had no dialogue whatsoever. It's fascinating to watch puppets move. Don't get so carried away thinking about what the puppets say. Give them plenty to *do*.

Keep it simple. If a show can be done well without a scene change that's the way to go. We once did a little production of *The Princess and the Pea*. The majority of the action involved marionettes. But I had my

Wendell and Lorraine: Celebrate

This show is about recognizing the good in the everyday. That it's not just the big "wow" moments, but the little things that are worth celebrating.



Setting: Wendell and Lorraine's Neighborhood (*Wendell is standing center stage wearing a colorful, homemade necklace and holding another. He is humming to himself*)

Lorraine: (*bops in*) Hi, Wendell.

Wendell: Hi, Lorraine.

Lorraine: Wow, Wendell. (*pointing to necklace*) That sure is a colorful necklace.

Wendell: Thanks, I made it myself.

Lorraine: What's it for? A birthday party?

Wendell: No. But it *is* for a celebration.

Lorraine: I know. It's for Easter.

Wendell: Nope.

Lorraine: Halloween.

Wendell: Uh-uh.

Lorraine: Groundhog Day?

Wendell: Nope.

Lorraine: St. Patrick's Day?!

Wendell: Give up?

Lorraine: (*sighs*) Yes.

Wendell: I made it for Happy Smiley Day.

Lorraine: Happy Smiley Day?!

Wendell: Mm-hm.

Lorraine: Never heard of it.

Pull-Tab Eye Puppets

Materials

- White plastic pull-tabs from orange juice or milk cartons
- Buttons
- Glue

I remember thinking how cool those plastic pull-tabs from orange juice and milk cartons were. I would usually give them to my daughters to wear as rings. I'm not sure exactly when it hit me that it kind of looked like an eyeball. But in about three minutes I had made a pair of eyes to wear on my hand. Despite its simplicity, the combination of eyes with a bare hand makes for a *very* expressive puppet.

Give each student two white plastic pull-tabs. Make sure they have been thoroughly washed with soap and hot water. Next allow each student to choose two buttons from a wide assortment. Giving students choices is an important distinction between art and craft.

Each pull-tab will have a ring part and a solid part. The solid part is the "eyeball." Have the students glue a button into the center of each eyeball. White glue is the safest, but it also takes the longest to dry. A hot glue gun works well, but I don't typically let my younger students handle a hot glue gun. Super glue dries very quickly, but it can run all over your fingers. And it takes a *long* time to get super glue off your fingers. (By the way, if you do get super glue on your skin, it can be removed with an acetone-based nail polish remover and a washcloth. And even then, it still doesn't just come right off, so be careful.) There's a new kind of super glue in a gel form. It's a lot easier to use, it doesn't run, and it doesn't make a mess. I suggest setting aside the eyes and moving on to another activity while they dry.

Once the glue dries the students can wear the eyes. The best way is on the middle and ring fingers, between the top and middle knuckles. Make sure the eyes are even and facing forward. The thumb can work as the mouth.



Found Object Puppets

Materials

- Just about anything you can get your hands on

Object puppetry is a form in which everyday objects are manipulated. You don't need glue, thread, or welding equipment for this kind of puppetry, just a keen eye for seeing an object's potential as a puppet.

Start by collecting many different objects from around the room (or school). Then invite the students to create puppets using the found objects. Before you say, "That's it?!" let's play a game. Here's a picture filled with everyday objects:



How many puppets could you make using the objects pictured?

