

Let's Play!

Learning Puppetry Improv

A Hands-On Workshop

By Amy Harder

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If you don't like getting smooshed into other, stickier, smellier people,
you're in the wrong line of work -- Frank OZ

Description: Loosening up and playing is such an important part of getting to know your puppet and being free to flow. *This class is for advanced puppeteers with a good handle on the basics.* We'll explore exercises and games to work on character development, drama basics, and live performance skills. Puppeteers should bring their favorite rod-arm or human-arm puppet and a sense of humor as we'll all be learning to open up and play our way to better improv skills. Directors are invited to come observe the class at no additional charge.

<http://del.icio.us/DearMyrah/ah02>

INTRODUCTION

The idea of this workshop is not to create professional improvisational comedians. Rather, the goal of this class is to equip puppeteers with:

- _____
- _____, and
- _____...

...to explore and refine their live performance skills through _____.

To some, the concepts discussed today will seem to be almost second nature. To others, the ideas may seem so awkward that they may feel like they'll never "get it."

It doesn't matter. Let's meet two stereotypical teens:

- Loosey Lou—can't sit still, always talking, loves to be the center of attention, is frequently asked, "Are you listening?"
- Silent Sam—statuesque, always quiet, prefers to sit back and watch, is frequently told, "Speak up, we can't hear you!"

Hopefully, your personality will be somewhere in between these two extremes. However, if you strongly identify with one of these characters, have no fear! Loosey Lou's can learn to control themselves and corral their boundless energy into productive puppet characters. Silent Sam's can learn to overcome their inhibitions and use their observation skills to create believable and fun characters.

Part 1: Loosen up!

- _____
 - ◆ Get rid of your inhibitions.
 - ◆ Let your brain flow.
 - ◆ Play games.
 1. Alliteration Introduction (get-to-know team members)
 2. Pass Yes (concentration)
 3. What Has Changed (observation)

- _____
 - ◆ Get rid of your inhibitions.
 - ◆ Let your muscles flow.
 - ◆ Play games.
 1. Stretching (warm-up muscles)
 2. Eights (explore range of motion)
 3. Objects (use your body to create things)

- _____
 - ◆ Work as a team/group.
 - ◆ Focus on the other person/people.
 - ◆ Play games.
 1. Circle Sitting (work together)
 2. Association Jump (take cues from others)
 3. Artist Model Clay (let others work with you)

Part 2: Know your stuff!

- _____ (lip synch, rod arms, eye contact, ...)
 - ◆ If you're concentrating on manip, you won't be free to flow.
 - ◆ Practice 'til the basics are second nature.
 - ◆ Play games.
 1. Puppet Aerobics
 2. Lip Synch Challenge

- _____ (projecting voice, facing audience, ...)
 - ◆ If you're concentrating on techniques, you won't be free to flow.
 - ◆ Practice 'til the basics are second nature.
 - ◆ Play games.
 1. Primal Screams (project your voice)
 2. Association Jump (using the stage/facing the audience)

- _____ (who, what, why, ...)
 - ◆ Know the character to make it believable.
 - ◆ Practice many different character types.
 - ◆ Play games.
 1. Greetings (explore emotions & attitudes)
 2. Honey Walk (explore settings & situations)
 3. Coming Home (character development)

Part 3: Get a plan!

- _____, the finish line or home plate
 - ◆ When you plan, start with the end...
 - ◆ Where are you going? What are you trying to teach?
 - ◆ Think of it as a goal. "I press on towards the goal" (Phil. 3:14)

- _____, the speed limit or fair territory
 - ◆ Know your character(s).
 - ◆ Know your time limit.
 - ◆ Know your audience.

- _____, the turns or rounding the bases
 - ◆ What points do you want to make?
 - ◆ Follow a logical progression.
 - ◆ It's OK to skip a step for the sake of time.

Games

Here's a list of games that lend themselves well to puppetry skill development and puppeteer warm-ups. The games (unless otherwise specified) were taken directly from humanpingpongball.com—a great resource for improvisational information and helps. (Please note that this site, while being an incredible source for more games and other drama improv stuff, is NOT a Christian web site. Use with discretion.)

Rag Doll—From tctarts.org—The rag-doll stretch is useful as a starting stretch because it is a whole body general warm-up. It starts us out by loosening up so much that we will be like a rag-doll. Rag dolls' bodies bend and flop. This exercise helps us to loosen up so our bodies bend easily. Reach up as high as you can! Next, relax your fingertips, and then your fingers, letting gravity take them towards the floor. Now, continue the relaxation down your whole body...wrists, elbows, head, neck, upper back, middle of the back, lower back. Now bend your knees and let yourself hang there -- totally relaxed. Reach for the stars! Repeat the rag-doll relaxation cycle.

Stretching—As a warm-up, let's do some simple stretching exercises. Everyone in the group shows a stretch of a body part, and that is then done by all others. Repeat until the whole body has been stretched. On a silly note, try stretching unstretchable body parts: eye balls, ears, hair, noses, toenails.

Eights—Excellent game to warm up those muscles. Everybody scatter around, stand up relaxedly. Ask the players to make an '8' movement with their left big toe, then their left foot, then whole left leg. Repeat with right toe/foot/leg. Repeat with left index finger, left hand, left lower arm, left arm. Repeat with right hand/finger/arm. Try both arms. In opposite directions. Make 8-shaped movements with your pelvis. Try horizontally and vertically. Try changing direction. Ditto for left shoulder, right shoulder, both shoulders. Ditto for your head. End exercise by making eights simultaneously with as many parts of your body as possible.

Objects—Divide the class in 2 groups. Give one group the name of an object, and they become, as a group, the object. Other group guesses.

Artist Model Clay—3 players. One is a lump of clay - behind her is a second player who is a model. Model takes a pose, which the 'clay' is not supposed to see. The third player becomes the artist, who will model the clay after the model. The artist is not supposed to touch the clay, can't speak and it not allowed to show the clay what to do or to become. When done, let the model inspect the artwork and see if details fit.

More Games

Circle Sitting—Have everyone stand in a circle, really close to each other, facing inwards. Then ask everyone to make a quarter turn left. Make everyone stand even closer to each other. When ask the whole group to sit down. If everyone is really close, they will end up sitting on one another's knees, and the whole construction supports itself. If well done it's even possible to make the circle walk. Indicate which foot to start with ;-)

Association Jump—This is physical association game. All players mill about the room. At any time, trainer yells a player's name. That player 'jumps' into a frozen position. The other players watch our subject jump into a position, and then build around that player, inspired by whatever the frozen position out subject jumped into. The end result is a still scene.

Primal Screams—All players in a circle. One player steps into the circle, making a big gesture and a loud sound. Player then steps back, and the rest of the circle imitates the sound and gesture.

The Scream—Everybody in a circle, watch the ground. On your sign, everybody lifts their head and either looks straight, left or right. Whenever 2 people look each other in the eyes, they scream as loud as they can, as if they're startled, and then drop dead. Repeat till only one or 2 players are alive.

Pass Yes—One player starts by saying 'Yes' to her lefthand neighbor. Neighbor does the same, passing the 'Yes' to her lefthand neighbor. Or she decides to say 'No', after which it's her righthand neighbors turn. Try and pass the 'Yes' along the circle as fast as possible. When everyone's got this. Do the same but with eyes closed.

Pass Ball—All players in a circle. Ask the players to pass a mimed ball to others (one ball at a time). Then side-coach: the ball becomes heavier, until it weighs a ton, or extremely light, extremely big (and light or heavy) or extremely small (and light or heavy). We need to 'see' the ball's characteristics in the way it gets passed.

Fruit Basket—All players but one sitting a circle, one person in the middle. The person in the middle calls out a category or some descriptive that might apply to some or all of the other players. E.g. all women, all blondes. When called, if a player matches the description must leave her chair and find another chair. Person that doesn't find a chair becomes the next in the middle.

Even More Games

Honey Walk—This is a group exercise. Tell the players they have an oxygen mask, and then talk them thru the exercise: players are to move about in successively thicker substances. Go from thin air, mist, warm water, oil, honey, Jell-O, wet cement to hard cement. End the game by having them 'frozen' in cement and break out with a big bang.

Alliteration Introduction—Excellent game for players to get to know each other's names. Everyone in a circle. A player starts the game by introducing himself by making a gesture, and alliterating to his name, e.g. "I'm Wonderful Wendy" or "I'm Smart Steve". The next player point to the first, repeats the previous player's name, attribute and gesture, and does something similar about himself. And so on. Game ends with the first player having to do each other player's gesture, repeating their names and attributes.

Three Noses—A fun and silly game. (This is a great game for new groups, as it lets the players get a feel—literally—for each other.) Let everyone walk leisurely around the room. When you shout '3 Noses' the players must form little groups, each group consisting of 3 touching noses. Use your imagination—ask for 7 left big toes, 2 earlobes, 9 fingers, ... Repeat till everyone is giggling.

Whoosh—Everybody in a circle. Start with one person, who waves both hands to his/her neighbor, saying '*Whoosh*'. The next person passes the Whoosh to his neighbor, and that way the Whoosh is passed around the circle. There's 4 other sounds/movements that can be made.

- '*Wow*': indicated by saying Wow, and moving both arms down. A Wow changes the direction of the Whoosh.
- '*Zap*': instead of passing the Whoosh to your neighbor, it gets zapped to the person you point to. The receiver continues with either a Whoosh to his neighbor, or another Zap to another person. A Wow after a Zap returns to the Zapper.
- '*Grooooooovelicious*': for this one the whole group bends down and up again in a kinda groovy way, all saying Grooooooovelicious. Afterwards, the person who started the Groovelicious sets the Whoosh in motion again, in any direction.
- '*Freakout*': indicated by waving both hands in the air. Everybody starts screaming and moves to the center of the circle. When everybody's freaked out a new circle is formed, and the starter of the Freakout sets the Whoosh in motion again (or Zaps, or does a Grooooooovelicious).

Still More Games

Greetings--All players start milling about the room. You then ask them to greet each other, perhaps just by shaking hands. Players just shake hands, move on, and greet the next player they meet. Then ask the players to greet each other in a more specific way. Possibilities are:

- Greet a long lost friend.
- Greet someone you don't really trust.
- Greet someone you don't really like.
- Greet someone you have a secret crush on.
- Greet someone with bad breath.
- Greet someone like you're a cowboy, soldier, grandma, kindergarten teacher, ...

Yes Let's—Pick a group activity, like throwing a party or organizing a picnic. One player starts, saying "Let's ..." filling in what she wants to do. Then she starts actually doing what she said she wanted to do. A second player jumps in, saying "Let's ..." do something else, to advance the group activity. Both players say "Yes, let's do that" and start doing whatever suggested. Third player jumps in, suggests what to do, and again all players loudly agree to do it, and actually do it. Continue till everyone has suggested something.

Coming Home—Ask players to think of someone they know. Then ask them to play how that person would come home from work. Players need to pay attention to

- The environment: what does that person's house look like? Is it neat and tidy or is it a mess? Big house or small apartment?
- What does he do? Does the character change clothes or showers or has a beer first? Does he eat? If so, what? Microwave dinner, carryout, pizza delivery or cornflakes?
- What mood is that character in?
- How was work today?

What Has Changed—Played in pairs. One player observes another closely. Then she closes her eyes, and her partner changes three things in his appearance. She open her eyes again and tries to discover what has changed.

Continuing Emotions—A 'neutral' scene is started, and is then interrupted (frozen) several times by the MC. The scene is then continued but all characters switch to an emotion provided by the audience.