Working with Video Monitors

A Hands-On Workshop
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And so that he can tell what's happening, a puppeteer always watches his performance in a television monitor. In a way, the puppeteer becomes an audience to his own performance. – Jim Henson

Description: Unlike traditional stage performance, video puppetry provides the performer with immediate knowledge of exactly what the audience will see. But working with monitors is a skill that takes time to acquire. Whether you're looking at television puppetry, webcast performance, or simply recording clips to use in children's church, you're going to need to know how to use monitors. Bring a puppet. We'll try new things, unleash possibilities, explore limitations, and discover the benefits of developing new skills.

http://del.icio.us/DearMyrah/ahVM

BASICS

Why use monitors?
- Monitors allow the performer to know exactly what the audience sees.
- Monitors give instant feedback so performers can tweak their performance as it goes on, rather than waiting to watch it in playback and try to remember what they're supposed to change.
- Monitors are ABSOLUTELY necessary when producing pieces for video, film, TV, or webcast.
    - You MUST know what your puppet looks like.
    - You MUST know where your puppet is looking.
    - It helps to be able to play to your audience when appropriate.

Set-up basics:
- Most video cameras have a way to get video out.
- Most monitors have a way to get video in.
- If possible, use a tripod.
- Zoom in on your puppet.
    - A 1- or 2-shot is perfect for practice.
    - Wide shots do not allow you to see details of your performance.

It is important that we recognize the limitations as well as the possibilities of video puppetry. Here are a few things to consider:

- The image on the screen will appear reversed to the performer.
- The screen frame is your stage.
    - No traditional stage
    - New boundaries all around
    - Off-screen = off-stage
    - No need for traditional entrances or exits
- Good focus is EXTREMELY important.

PRACTICE

Just as a musician must practice scales or an athlete must run drills, puppeteers can use simple practice exercises to develop new performance skills.

> You have to train your brain!

Working with monitors does not come naturally. It is a whole new type of hand-eye coordination that will take time to master. Even if you think you'll never use these tools in your video performance, these exercises will help you know your parameters and range of movement!

PRACTICE: Reverse/Focus

Crossing the Street (exploring the reversed image)
Puppet CS. Look left. Look right. Then back to front. Repeat.
(This exercise helps train our brains that when we turn our hands to the left, it appears opposite on the screen.)

Color Test (mastering reversed image)
Puppet CS. (Notice the background screens have different colors on each corner.)
When prompted, puppet should look towards the color that is called.
(This exercise sounds easy on paper, but try to do it without looking away from your monitor. It's cheating to look backwards at your background!)

Lean Off Me (playing with reversed image)
In pairs. Puppet A CS. Puppet B enters behind A and leans out to the left or right (puppeteer's choice). Puppet A must then lean the opposite way. Both puppets look at each other. Switch roles and repeat.
(It is important that a puppeteer is able to think quickly and act appropriately. In this exercise, one puppeteer leads and the other must follow. Of course, the follower must know the left/right reversal. This exercise allows for more practice with the reverse image while working with another performer.)

Harrumph (practicing focus)
Puppet CS. Focus at camera. Look away. Focus. Away. Etc.
(This one is worth it to master. Being able to snap your focus right back to the camera—your audience—is a valuable tool in video performance.)

Harrumph Harrumph (more practice focusing)
Puppet CS. Focus at camera. Turn whole puppet body away. (Feel free to add folded arms and tapping toes!) Turn body back to focus. Turn away. Etc.
(This exercise is much like the previous one, but with the addition of whole body movement. You know you've "got it" when you can be anywhere on screen and snap right back to focus in a split-second.)

Exit Play (combining reverse & focus practice)
Turn Variation: Puppet on screen. Turn left. Exit left. Repeat right.
Shuffle Variation: Puppet on screen. Stay facing forward. Shuffle out left. Repeat right.
"Piggy" Variation: Puppet on screen. Turn left. Look back at camera while body stays facing left. Giggle. Exit left (body facing left, face to camera) while giggling. Repeat right.
(This exercise provides more practice training the left/right reversal as well as increasing focus ability while moving.)

Me—No Me (combining reverse & focus practice)
In pairs. Puppet A CS. Puppet B slide bumps A out of frame. A returns in like manner.
(In this exercise, it is important to remember and practice focus. This one is a good one for adding drama and characterizations. Ham it up. Just don't get too violent!)

PRACTICE: Frame/Boundaries

Memory Lane
From offstage, puppet walks across the screen from R to L. No stopping. No focusing. Once offstage again, drop puppet down off screen and repeat same motion. Continue repetitions to learn where the boundary is. See how quickly you can repeat the cycle without giving away your secret.
(It is so important to know where the off-screen boundaries are and be able to get there fast. This exercise helps puppeteers discover where this magic line exists and how to work around it.)

Merry Pop-Ins
Vertical Variation: Puppet hides off screen below CS and pops into the shot.
Horizontal Variation: Puppet hides off screen and pops into the shot sideways.
(Can you find the middle? In this exercise, we train ourselves to know where to find the center of the shot and how to get there every time. Again, you need to know where your boundaries are in order to use them to your advantage.)

Puppet Parade
In pairs. Puppet A walks from offstage R to L. Puppet B follows. As soon as a puppet leaves the screen, drop down and reset to continue the parade line. Keep it going!
(In this exercise, puppeteers are challenged to keep the illusion alive through good puppetry and video skills. Make sure the puppets are spaced out properly so it doesn't look like a pair of puppets then a big space…)

Puppet Parade In Reverse
In pairs. Puppets perform as in the exercise above, but walking backwards as if the videotape is being played in reverse.
(This exercise can really be a challenge! Remember spacing and boundaries.)

PRACTICE: Near/Far

One Step Forward, Two Steps Back
Puppet CS. Take one jump towards the camera. Take two steps away from the camera. Repeat until you reach your limit.
(This exercise will show puppeteers just how high up they need to be to stay in the shot while moving away from the camera. Be aware of good puppet height during this one.)

The Grover
Puppet CS. Turn and run as far back as possible. Turn back to camera and run back.
(Puppeteers need to know how even short distances appear on screen. In this exercise, it is important to watch puppet height and make sure heads stay out of the shot.)

Slo-Mo Long Jump
Puppet Back CS. Puppet takes a giant leap forward in slow motion.
(Again, watch your height/head and see what fun you can have with near/far.)