

Embodying the Spirits

Puppets in the Dance Studio

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Using puppets helps students get in the spirit.

The tradition of using giant puppets in dance rituals is widespread throughout Africa. Puppets, most often involving large masks, are used to embody spiritual beings, creating a sense of excitement and reverence (Dagan, 1997). They can represent deceased ancestors, helping participants to feel that these sacred beings are still present and involved with the community. They also can represent forces of nature or different characters drawn from tribal mythology. The masks used for giant puppets can “form a sort of chain that links the visible and invisible worlds, the world of today with that of its origins, the living and dead, natural and spiritual forces” (Hunt & Savary, 1996, p. 18). Huge puppets can communicate spiritual and moral authority, which is all the more easily accepted because it is delivered with a sense of playfulness.

Giant puppets also create unique movement possibilities. Because they enlarge and extend the human form, puppet gestures can be extremely effective and articulate. A puppet sometimes may achieve more meaning with less movement than a human dancer. Conversely, traveling movements may require more space or more time when performed by puppets. Since the puppets often do not have the same configuration of limbs as a human dancer, body part substitutions may be necessary. New movement variations will be molded by the distinct physical properties of the puppets in use. If a puppet requires more than one dancer to carry and manipulate its parts, these dancers must be carefully coordinated. If the group carrying the puppet moves in relationship to other dancers, unique movement interactions can occur.

This potent combination of symbolic meaning and choreographic challenge make the use of puppets a valuable tool for teaching African dance and for creating a sense of unity in an educational setting.

An Example at Bronx Community College

Every semester Bronx Community College (BCC) holds a “kick off” event to welcome freshmen to the school. Administrators and department chairpersons are introduced, followed by a motivational speaker. The student dance and music clubs are invited to perform. As faculty advisor to BCC Dance Workshop, I try to choreograph something that supports the general theme of the event, which is the life-enhancing value of higher education and self-examination. We also encourage our students to see themselves as part of a college community, where they will learn to adopt a broader, more global perspective.

This year I chose a piece of music written by Angélique Kidjo. “Afrika” was written to benefit We Are the Future, an organization committed to aiding children whose lives have been devastated by war. As I introduced our dance, I was able to talk about the essential idea that all of us, worldwide, are responsible for all of the world’s children.

The song begins with a solo female voice (Kidjo) teaching a wonderful sing-along chorus to the audience. She asks, “Are you ready to sing for solidarity? Are you ready to sing for the children of the world?” Then she teaches these words: “Ase mama, ase mama, Afrika; ase mama, ase mama, Afrika” (Amen mama, amen mama, Africa). To lend moral authority to this concept of solidarity and mutual responsibility for children around the world, I used a giant puppet. The puppet required three dancers to carry her: one dancer holding a central pole attached to the head, and two dancers (one on each side)



Photo above: The giant puppet Nyansofa (“wise one” in the Akan language of Ghana) awaits the performance.

holding poles attached to hands. Members of the BCC Dance Workshop had previously named our puppet “Nyansofa,” which means “wise one” in the Akan language of the people of Ghana. Nyansofa is about 15 feet high. Her head, made of cardboard and paper maché, is modeled after pictures of African masks. She has long dreadlocks made out of raffia and braided by the students. Her body and arms are made of bamboo poles covered with plumbing insulation, and draped in fabric. She wears long necklaces of beads made of painted styrofoam, strung together with wire. Her hands are made of gloves stuffed with cotton, with long finger extensions covered by paper maché. Nyansofa is a colorful, inspiring presence, and she had no trouble engaging the audience to participate in Kidjo’s call-and-response chant.

Once the song began, the rest of the students in the club danced down the aisles carrying small hand puppets that were modeled after African fertility dolls. Fertility dolls are carried by African women in the back of their skirt, to ensure that their children will be healthy (Parrinder, 1967). We used our “dolls” to represent the children of the world.

The students joined Nyansofa onstage, dancing in front, alongside, and sometimes around her. Since she has “joints” at the shoulders and elbows, she is capable of a wide variety of arm movements. She can also be raised and lowered on her poles. Therefore, she could appear to almost merge with the student dancers, or she could tower above them, serving as an empowering spirit and a focus for their movement. My students and I enjoyed exploring the choreographic adjustments that were necessary to coordinate the moves of the three dancers carrying the giant puppet, with the moves of the group of solo dancers, each carrying a small hand puppet.

The song ends with many repetitions of the sing-along chorus. We dismounted off the front of the stage, and brought Nyansofa down into the audience. Following her lead, we danced through the aisles, encouraging students and faculty to sing along “for solidarity.” When we were finished, it was impossible to know how much of the generous final applause was for our dancing, and how much was for the concept of interconnectedness that we were advocating. As we carried

Puppet Making for Dancers

I learned how to make a giant puppet by attending a five-day workshop in “Puppet Pageantry” that was offered by Alex Kahn and Sophia Michahelles (www.superiorconcept.org). Kahn and Michahelles are the official puppeteers for the annual Village Halloween parade in New York City, and they have taught and performed internationally. Their workshop, held annually at the Omega Institute in Rhinebeck, New York, was a fascinating hands-on experience in puppet making, which culminated in a pageant performance.

At first I was quite intimidated. Like many dancers, I feel comfortable with other genres of the performing arts, but I am somewhat “gun shy” when it comes to the fine arts. As we learned to make the puppets, using power tools that I had never used before, I despaired of trying to bring these techniques back to the college and implementing them with my students. However, as the days went by, I learned that there were many alternative approaches. Indeed, building a giant puppet and smaller hand-held puppets with my students turned out to be not only possible, but extremely rewarding. We made our puppet with supplies that were relatively inexpensive and easily available at the hardware store. The key to success was courage, and learning how to use materials that were new to me, and might be unfamiliar to many dance teachers. Here is a summary of the process:

1. The head of the puppet was made using large pieces from a discarded cardboard box, taped into a cylinder. Next, the cardboard was covered with papier-mâché. For the final layer of paper, we used plain brown paper with no printing on it, so that it could be easily painted. (It is

very helpful to have a picture of an African mask for inspiration. Wonderful photos of puppets and masks used in dance processions have been collected by Barbara Mauldin [2004].) Once the head was finished, we used aluminum wire circling around the inside to reinforce it at several points, ensuring that the head would be strong enough to survive being jostled during the dance. Aluminum wire is thick but bends very easily. It is also easy to cut with a wire cutter.

For the neck we used a cardboard mailing tube, available from the post office. After we painted it, we attached it to the head with aluminum wire. (We could also have used hot glue and a glue gun to attach the neck to the inside of the head.)

2. Once the head and neck are finished, details like hair or a hat can be added using hot glue. In our case, we merely tied a piece of elastic around the head and then used safety pins to attach braided rattan dreadlocks and hair.

3. The body of the puppet is the most complicated part of the process. Kahn and Michahelles taught us to use bamboo pieces, because they are light and easy to carry. I found that I was also able to use long broom handles, twisting off the brooms and working with the poles.

4. The central pole must be quite long. The bamboo poles at our workshop were about 13 feet long. (Two broom handles can be somewhat overlapped and wrapped tightly with duct tape to achieve this length.) A few feet down from the top, a shorter cross pole must be attached to form the shoulders. For this purpose, a dowel can be purchased in the hardware store, and secured with duct tape and aluminum wire. Before you attach this cross-

Nyansofa out the door, we felt that our dance had achieved its moral purpose and the audience had received our message. Since a principle of African dance aesthetics is that the dance must achieve its purpose to be “beautiful,” we were very satisfied indeed (Welsh-Asante, 1996).

Educational Outcomes

One of the most wonderful aspects of creating puppets with students is that you open up a new door for their creativity. Students who are shy in dance class, or have difficulty learning movement combinations, may be precisely the students that shine when designing puppets. The class has the opportunity to spend time together working creatively, but talking casually, a situation that is often not possible during dance classes or rehearsals. This helps students get to know one another in new ways, which can add to their sense of connection while dancing. In addition, at BCC, students from outside the dance group became involved in making the puppets and then came to see the performance because they had a personal investment in the outcome. The puppets

helped to build a sense of community.

Community is the key to Afro-Caribbean dance celebrations throughout the world. All over Africa, and throughout the African Diaspora, danced rituals and carnival celebrations unite the people through shared meanings and shared opportunities for creative participation. Mask carvers, musicians, costume designers, singers, dancers, choreographers, and composers all emerge from among the local population and unite for a common purpose. This experience of drawing on the varied talents of the participants to create a multi-disciplinary artistic event can be made vibrant through the process of creating puppets with students, integrating them into a dance routine, and involving students from outside of the performing group. In performance, the audience can be encouraged to sing along, and if the situation allows, the puppets can be used to invite audience members into the dance procession. Student musicians can accompany the dancers and puppets as they move. Dancing processions with puppets, and with varied possibilities for audience participation, can provide American students with a vivid experience

piece, drill a small hole in each end, so that you will be able to attach the arms later. (If you do not have a power drill, or are uncomfortable using one, ask for help at the hardware store.) Once the cross-piece is in place, a thick piece of cardboard should be used to build up the shoulders. Cut a hole in the center of the cardboard, and slide it down over the long central pole you are using for the body, until it rests on the cross-piece. Tie the cardboard in place with a piece of clothesline, or any other strong cord, or use aluminum wire.

5. The arms are vital to the success of the puppet because, as moveable parts, they add a great number of expressive possibilities. For each arm you need two shorter lengths of bamboo or wooden dowels. You can cover them with pipe insulation to make them thicker, but you need to leave a small bit uncovered at each end so that you can attach them. You need to drill a small hole through each end of each of your four pieces. Purchase a pack of “quick ties” from the hardware store. These are wonderful, inexpensive thin stripes of plastic that have a loop on one end and can form an irreversibly sealed circle. You also need to buy six wire rings used to hold keys. Put a quick tie through each end of all four arm pieces and on each end of the cross-piece. Close the quick ties into tightly sealed circles and cut off the extra. Next slip a wire key ring through each of the quick ties. Now you can slip the key rings together so that you attach the upper arms at the “shoulder joints” and the forearms to the “elbow” joints. Take two longer broom handles or pieces of bamboo and attach them at the “wrist” joints in the same fashion. These two additional poles will be carried by two additional dancers, each one manipulating one arm of the puppet, as the center person carries the main pole supporting the

head, neck, and shoulders.

6. We used soft black woolen gloves to make the hands, and stuffed them with cotton to make them as big as they could possibly stretch. Then we stuck wooden pencils up through the fingers so the hands would be stiff and hold their shape as they moved. Next, we covered the fingers with pipe insulation to make them longer and used some aluminum wire inside the pipe insulation to keep the fingers strong. We covered the fingers with papier-mâché and paint to give them the colors we wanted.

We stretched the ends of the gloves over the ends of the poles used to support the arms, and used tightly sealed quick ties to hold them in place.

7. When the body of the puppet is finished, drape fabric over it to form a costume and cover the body. Safety pins, staples, or stitches can be used to hold the costume together. (Remember that the dancer who is holding the puppet has to be able to see, so the costume cannot hang down too low.)

8. It is convenient if the head remains detachable, so that the puppet can be disassembled and transported. We achieved this by using pipe insulation around the top of the long pole, and then wrapping a towel around it. We experimented to find out exactly how much towel we needed, so that it would be just the right thickness to make a tight enough fit to hold the neck in place when the cardboard tube was slipped on over the pole.

9. There are many ways to make small hand puppets. A simple method is to use poster board, because it is durable and holds its shape. To make our fertility dolls, we first sketched the outlines onto the poster board, and then cut them out with an Exacto knife. Finally, the students painted them with their own designs.



Three students guide the movements of Nyansofa in a performance by the Bronx Community College Dance Workshop of Angélique Kidjo's "Afrika."

rooted in Afro-Caribbean traditions. This directly supports two of the goals outlined in the *National Standards for Dance Education* (NDA, 1994): "Demonstrating and understanding dance in various cultures and historical periods" (content standard 5, p. 22), and "Making connections between dance and other disciplines" (content standard 7, p. 22).

Over the years, I have found that abstract choreographic principles can sometimes be very hard for students to grasp, particularly if they have limited dance experience. Most can easily understand that dance can tell a story, or create a mood. They have much more difficulty with the idea that a dance can be an abstract exploration of movement for its own sake, because movement possibilities are intrinsically fascinating. Students who are new to dance also may have difficulty understanding the concept of a movement problem, with specific boundaries for choreographic choices.

Working with puppets can help clarify these issues for students in an exciting way. By experimenting with the joints of the puppet to learn which movement choices are possible, students may discover new choreography that they would not otherwise find. The puppet can be a source of meaning, but it can also be a springboard for abstract movement exploration. Furthermore, the clear limits of the puppet's anatomy can help students to understand that only some movements are possible. They can easily see that if the structure of the puppet is altered, the movement possibilities will be altered.

One of the most enjoyable aspects of our experience at Bronx Community College was when we compared the ways in which the human dancers could move with the movement possibilities for Nyansofa. How did we have to vary the steps so that the puppet could still perform them? How could the puppet and the other dancers fit on stage and move together? This led us to make lively experiments with directionality, with substituting body parts, with changing the size or speed of gestures, and other possibilities. We began with the movements of the student dancers and then

created the movements for the puppet. The next time we work with our puppet, I would like to reverse this procedure by beginning with puppet choreography and having students experiment with variations for humans. I believe that both processes can have very valuable creative results and can provide opportunities for students to deepen their understanding of the craft of choreography, fulfilling goals defined under dance content standard two ("Understanding choreographic principles, processes, and structures," NDA, 1994, p. 21).

Because puppets have symbolic meanings, teachers can adapt them to a wide array of curriculum goals for students at any grade level. They can be used to represent spirits, ancestors, animals, forces of nature, political or historical figures, scientific principles, and so forth. Using puppets opens up a new avenue of creativity for teachers and can inspire us to stretch. At the same time, making puppets and learning to dance with them challenges students to reflect deeply on the essential characteristics that they are trying to portray. What is the essence of the movement? What is the essence of the mask? What kind of sounds will help to create the effects that are needed? What cultures have similar concepts and rituals? As students rise to the challenge of answering these questions, they can make progress on "Understanding dance as a way to create and communicate meaning" (content standard 3, NDA, 1994, p. 21), and "Applying and demonstrating critical and creative thinking skills in dance" (content standard 4, NDA, p. 21).

Beyond the requirements of specific academic justification, the use of puppets in the dance studio gives students the opportunity to bring many parts of themselves to the project, opening new creative possibilities, and adding excitement and wonder to their dance experience. Surely, these too are worthwhile goals.

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