

Lip Synchronization: The Art Of Bringing Your Puppets To Life

By Clif Desmond



True puppetry as an art form requires the almost magical ability to make your puppets come to life. The biggest responsibility of a puppeteer is to develop the skills to create the illusion that the puppet is a living, breathing, thinking character. The puppet cannot simply stand there and recite lines, he must also react to what is going on around him. When he speaks, his mouth and body movements must be in unison with his dialog. This ability is known throughout the puppet world as lip sync (lip synchronization).

Since puppet characters are usually over-exaggerated, sometimes their movements are too. Lip sync should always be carefully calculated and practiced to perfection so that the hand moving the puppet's

mouth always appears to have a natural flow. Proper lip sync should eventually become automatic for any experienced puppeteer. This is very important to your success as a puppet master!

In spite of the fact that the audience knows that puppets are not real, if you can perfect the art of lip sync, the crowd will literally be eating out of your hands! Like music, conversation and dialog has rhythm. The secret of lip sync is actually quite simple once you get used to it.

Here is a creative way to instruct someone on the art of lip sync. Let's take the word "syllable". There are actually three syllables in the word. In most cases your puppet's mouth should open and close once for each syllable. For example, if your puppet says "Hi! How are you?" the mouth should open and close four times, once for each syllable! This movement should coincide with the actual words spoken by the puppeteer. There are just a few exceptions to this rule. Once you develop an understanding and application of lip synchronization, you should be able to operate the puppet's mouth automatically, so you will be able to concentrate on other important movements.

Take the time to carefully watch how other puppeteers manipulate their puppets. You will see the syllable rule applied. Watch very carefully and you will see the exception to this rule. Let's use the word "syllable" again. When you make your puppet say the word, you will only need to move his mouth twice! Even though the word "syllable" contains three syllables, your puppet's mouth only needs to open and close twice! Why is this? Be observant while watching people when they speak. Some syllables are articulated from within the human mouth. The tongue presses against the back of your upper teeth for the "TH", "L" sounds. For the "Z" sound your mouth usually closes the teeth and the tongue presses against the roof of your mouth. Sounds for some vowels may also originate from inside of your mouth and don't require you to close your lips. When you translate these sounds into lip sync the puppet's mouth may actually skip an occasional syllable movement!

There is no better way to develop professional puppetry skills than practice! The mirror is the most common and least expensive method but using a video camera can be a lot of fun! If you can watch a monitor while rolling a cam corder not only can you perfect your lip sync skills you will also learn how to make your puppets play into a camera. When your puppet directs his dialog directly into a camera, he is looking directly into the eyes of the viewers! Even the most famous puppeteers desire and strive to be skillful in this area. Practice, rehearse and watch your audience respond!

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