

Adding Puppets and Props to Your Storytelling

Vicky Dworkin

In 2004, while attending the National Storytelling Conference in Bellingham, Washington, I bought my first Folkmanis puppet to use in storytelling. Carrying him around that day transformed me as a storyteller. Bufo is big. He is not easy to conceal. He is a TOAD – greener than the cane toads in Hawaii, where I lived then, but instantly recognizable. “Bufo” is not only the name of a genus of 150 toad species, it is the Hawaiian pidgin word for “toad.” As soon as I saw him, I knew he had to come home with me. As I carried him from session to session, a young girl, attending the conference with her storytelling mom, eagerly told me the story of “Tiddalick,” also known as The Biggest Frog in Australia. At lunch in the Western Washington University cafeteria we were sharing with high school soccer camp and cheerleader camp students, three girls came up to me and begged me to tell them a story. Me? I was a strictly local librarian teller, nothing compared to the fabulous nationally-known tellers there at the conference. Why did they ask me? Because Bufo was sitting on my tray. They didn’t want me to tell them a story, they wanted Bufo. So I told them “Tiddalick.” They returned to their

table, and three more girls came and begged for a story. Bufo and I went to their table and retold “Tiddalick.” The girls at the next table begged me to tell it again. Tell a story three times and it is yours. I was instantly hooked on telling with puppets. A few years later, more than a year after I did a storytelling workshop at a woman’s prison, someone walked up to me at a bus stop and asked, “Do you still have Bufo?” She was one of the prisoners, now on work-release, and she recognized me immediately because Bufo had made such an impression on her. Such is the power of puppets.

Some tellers adopt one puppet and use it mostly between stories: to draw a crowd, to interact with the audience, to comment on the program as the teller’s alter-ego, and occasionally to tell a story. Not me. I now own at least 50 puppets. Most are associated with a particular story; some belong in multiple stories, and a few are still waiting to discover their own story. And I tell versions of “Stone Soup” and “Froggie Went A-Courting” where every child in the audience gets a puppet to play a small part in the story. Most of my puppets come from Folkmanis, an outstanding brand highly favored by teachers, librarians, puppeteers, and storytellers; some are yard sale finds, and a few are homemade or converted stuffed animals. I inherited most of the homemade ones (as well as some of the Folkmanis ones) from a storytelling friend who was downsizing and hoped I would put them to good use. Now she tells stories with magic tricks –we share a love for props, but hers now take up less room and are easier to transport. I’ve even made a couple of finger puppets myself. I am a dedicated non-sewer, but anyone can do a lot with felt and glue. Stick puppets can be easy to make - or they can be quite elaborate. I tend to make simple ones. I don’t even try to use marionettes! Those are complex and require more physical dexterity than I have.

I don’t really consider myself to be a puppeteer, except in the loosest sense of the word. For me, an important distinction between storytelling with puppets and what most people think of as “puppet theater” is that as a storyteller, I don’t use a stage. I am out in the open with the puppet and don’t even try to hide the fact that I am doing the talking. Of course there are storytelling ventriloquists and talented puppeteers who turn to storytelling, but you don’t need to be a highly skilled puppeteer to use

puppets when telling. As in Bunraku, a form of Japanese puppet theater, even when the person manipulating the puppet is visible, the puppet itself takes center stage and works its magic.

Do you find it challenging to tell stories to wriggling young squirmers? What do you do when you are expecting an audience of ages 5 and up, but every family seems to have brought younger siblings as well? Do you have to throw out your carefully planned program and go with the few tried-and-true stories for three-year-olds that you remember? No, you don't, but you may find that a different type of advance planning will make it easier for you to tell the longer stories you had in mind, and still keep the attention of the little ones. Telling with puppets and props can help to hold the attention of your audience and amuse both the older and younger ones at the same time. It's not always a question of "this is a story for four-year-olds" and "that is a story for eight-year-olds" Sometimes you can bridge an age gap by the way you tell the story. Having something to look at makes it easier for young ones to focus. If older children are getting restless because you are directing too much attention to the younger ones, bring them into the story. Ask an older child to explain a word or phrase to the younger ones, allow them to help you with your props, let one of them handle a puppet, get them to set an example by chiming in with a refrain, and they won't feel like they are being treated like babies.

Are you a new teller and worried that you will get confused and mix up the order of events in a repetitive story? Are you, like many teachers and librarians, confident reading picture books aloud but convinced you couldn't "tell" a story because you couldn't memorize all the words? Are you afraid to use old fashioned words for things that your listeners might not understand? Puppets or props, especially Velcro figures on a flannel board, may help with these problems as well. How can a snow bear sleep under a stove in a Norwegian cabin, with just its nose sticking out, in the Norwegian story "The Cat on the Dovrefell"? Find a picture of an elaborate Scandinavian tile stove raised on legs to show your audience and allow them to visualize the story a little bit better. For a repetitive story, like "The Gingerbread Boy," "The Elegant Rooster," or "The Little Old Woman who was Not Afraid of Anything," make images (felt figures or laminated cardstock and Velcro) of each character or object in turn,

number them on the back, make sure the pile is in order before you start the story, and you won't go wrong. You don't need to memorize the story if you have the sequence and the refrain down. You can even write the refrain on the back if you worry you might trip over the words. With a felt board, you can get the audience to recite the entire chain with you, just by pointing to the pieces. If you don't want to have to lug a felt board with you when you perform, laminate the pieces and tape them to craft sticks or chopsticks, number them, and just hold them up. Or make a folding felt board for stories that need to show more pieces at one time than you can easily hold in your hands. Or you can just carry a piece of felt and clips, and find something flat to attach it to once you reach the place you are telling. Plan ahead for wind if you are telling outdoors!

Which comes first, the story or the puppet? It works both ways. Sometimes, I buy a puppet because I know there are stories I can use it with. I was telling "The Little Red Hen" before I had a red chicken puppet, but it was easy to add the puppet once I got one. Sometimes, I fall in love with a puppet and need to find a story to use it with – like Bufo and "Tiddalick." Sometimes, I adapt a story simply to fit a particular puppet. When I tell "Stone Soup", the protagonist is a porcupine, and all the other characters are woodland animals. "Stone Soup" doesn't usually have a porcupine in it, but it does if I say it does. As Pudge, the porcupine, I narrate the story. When I give each child a puppet, they have to decide what kind of food that animal will contribute to the pot.

For my version of "The Enormous Turnip," I pick a few members of the audience to come up, take a puppet, and help me, while all of the audience joins in the refrain: "He tugged and he pulled, he pulled and he tugged, but that turnip would not BUDGE!" Personally, I don't care for human puppets, so the old man wears a hat and the old woman a kerchief. The rest of the volunteers get puppets (cat, dog, donkey and mouse, as I tell it) and have to make appropriate sound effects while they join the line and pull. I added the donkey to the story when I got a new donkey puppet. I have found it is best if I take on the role of the old man myself, instead of using a volunteer. It is easier for me to make sure the volunteers don't get too enthusiastic if I am the only one who actually has my hands on the giant turnip. I made the turnip from a large orange ball by adding a felt

root and leaves made from fly swatters also adorned in felt. If the helpers get too wild, the turnip can fall apart.

I also mix formats. For “Turtle’s Flying Lesson,” Turtle is a puppet, and I am the Eagle. The turtle puppet is the only prop. There are stories where I combine several Velcro pieces with one puppet, easier than juggling multiple puppets. That is how I tell “The Little Red Hen” to very young children, if I simply want them to make animal sounds but not play specific roles. For older children, I still use Velcro pieces for seeds, grain, watering pot, hoe, scythe, mill, etc., which makes it easy to explain some of the less familiar terms, but the animal friends are played by individual children. For “The Elegant Rooster,” I use a rooster puppet, but the rest of the figures in the chain are not puppets: flower, sheep, dog, stick, fire, water, and sun go on the felt board.

Play with your puppets until you find a voice that sounds right for them. Try them on to learn the best ways to manipulate them. Often it helps to rest the body or feet of the puppet on one arm, while you wear it on the other hand. This helps to ground it. Are you comfortable wearing a puppet on each hand at the same time? This is easier with stage puppets (head and upper body only) than with full body puppets. If your story has more roles than you can easily handle as puppets, you will have to make choices. Small roles can be given to audience members. You can whisper lines to them, or let them make up their own if the sequence is obvious. More complex stories may work best told in tandem (four hands) with another teller, prepped in advance. Or you can wear one puppet and manipulate it, while holding another as if it were simply a stuffed animal. Remember, when a puppet is telling the story as narrator, it should be aware of and speaking directly to your audience. If you are playing one role and the puppet another, you and it must interact with each other. Or your puppets can talk to each other, ignoring you.

Sometimes, I fall in love with a story first, and then look for ways to “prop” it. Since telling with props has become my distinctive style, when I am telling to children I almost always try to find at least one visual item to throw into the story. You don’t need to use props for the entire story. For many stories, one object is enough to give it focus. I tell a story

from China, “The Lady in Green,” and the only prop I use is the Chinese character for the word “Thank you” written on green paper and laminated. That one item grounds the story, so that I can use it with younger listeners than I would expect to understand it without props. I was surprised when a five-year-old chose it as her favorite story in a program. It is cerebral, not participatory, but the spoken visual imagery is powerful, and the written character makes it easy to understand the most confusing part – the luna moth using the scholar’s ink to write. Occasionally, when I try to prop a story, I realize it isn’t the right story for my needs. I got a new bunny puppet as a present, and thought I would tell a story where a hunter traps a bunny and then releases it when the bunny offers to help him if he is in need. I tried to form a snare from a rope, and realized that a strangled bunny was not a good visual for my young audience. I decided not to tell that story at all. Instead, I tell “The Lion and the Mouse,” originally with an unused mop head found at a thrift shop to suggest the lion’s mane; now with a new lion puppet. For workshops, I still offer participants a choice between lion puppet or mop head. The mop was so successful; I hate to give it up.

I make many of my own props, or use found objects. Originally, I used books like Judy Sierra’s *The Flannel Board Storytelling Book*, to come up with Velcro pieces (easier for me than felt). I would print them on cardstock, color them in, laminate them and stick Velcro on the back. Now, I usually go to Google Image clipart and print public domain images in color, laminate and Velcro them, or turn them into stick puppets. For other things, it is amazing what you come up with simply by looking at what you already have. An ivory letter opener becomes a spear, a piece of cardboard, a wall, a rain stick, a tower, a rope, a tail and a toy snake, a snake, for “The Blind Men and the Elephant”. I blindfold children and have them guess what they are touching, while I show the elephant puppet to the rest of the audience. To tell “Sam and the Tigers,” I use one tiger puppet and four cardstock and Velcro tigers, along with felt pants, shirt, shoes, and umbrella (all easy to make), a tree and a yellow paper puddle of butter. No human figures and I avoid the hurtful names and images of the original story by Helen Bannerman. Sambo, Mumbo, and Jumbo have racist implications, and many earlier editions have horrible illustrations, but there is nothing wrong with the actual story.

Even when you tell with props, you are still asking your audience to stretch their imaginations and visualization skills. Hold up a small green polished stone, and tell the listeners the farmers had dug up the biggest piece of jade anyone has ever seen (use your arms to show how big). Show them a small silver-colored bowl two inches across, and tell them the servants brought in a large bowl full of water, so big it took two of them to carry it. Your listeners will do the rest. The fact that the silver bowl actually came from China, as did the small coins I drop in it, adds to the magic of the Chinese story of the “Official Who Judged a Stone”. Assorted hats and scarves, noise makers of all varieties, seed pods, stones, feathers – all can be transformed through the magic of story. Find a hollow gourd, fill it with small bags of coins and of rice and a long silk scarf, and you have the Korean story of the Grateful Bird, who rewards the farmer who mended his broken wing with a seed that grows into a gourd filled with an endless bag of coins, a bag of rice that will never empty, and a bolt of silk that has no end. How can a child not believe, when they see it right before their eyes? Hats are marvelous. The possibilities are endless. And of course, never underestimate the power of glitter. A single glittering red feather? *The Firebird*.

There are a few disadvantages to telling with puppets and props. Good quality puppets are expensive. Either be more discriminating than I am in your choice of puppets to use, or tell all your family members that they never need to wonder what to get for your birthday, Christmas, or Hanukkah. A puppet is always welcome. Space, of course, is the other main disadvantage. I started telling with just my voice and body, then added a small stationary box for Velcro figures, then a backpack, and now a large suitcase, just for the puppets, props, noise makers, and felt board for a single program. And of course, there is the room needed to store everything you are not currently using – and to make the things you want to use. When I lived in a very small house, I kept most of my things in the library where I worked. When I retired, I was lucky enough to buy a house with room for all my stuff -- puppets, props, hats, costumes, percussion instruments, and more. When I first saw the long, narrow closet full of shelves in the basement hallway, my first thought was “Puppets!” and my second was “I’m home.” A final warning: don’t let yourself get too

dependent on your props. I realized the disadvantage of the large suitcase when I had to tell stories at multiple libraries on four islands in Hawaii — accessible only by plane. Fifty dollars each way for a checked bag ate a lot into my fee. I reexamined my list of stories, left out “Stone Soup,” and repacked to make everything fit into a carry-on bag. You also want to be confident that you can still tell any story on the spot, without any of your carefully prepared supplements. You never know when you may be called upon for an impromptu telling, or when you may arrive at your destination and find out that you left an essential item behind. While I feel that the puppets and other objects enhance my telling and make it easier to connect to a mixed audience, I don’t want to risk feeling that I can’t tell without them.

A final anecdote: one of my favorite storytelling experiences. One day, I was on the bus going home from work, bringing some cardstock figures I had made to go with stories I was working on to tell later that week. A little girl, about three, kept popping out from behind her mother to say “Hi.” Her mother explained that her preschool class had been to the library the day before and I had read them a story. I knew which one: Margaret Read MacDonald’s “The Squeaky Door”, one of the ones I planned to tell (not read) at Storytime that weekend. I showed them the pieces I had for the stories I was practicing and told a quick version of one. It may have been “The Noisy House” or something similar. Then she asked to see the figures for The Squeaky Door and wanted me to tell it to her again. As I began, a hush fell over the front part of the bus, as other people noticed me telling and showing the figures. Another mother and child got on as I started, and took the nearest seats so they could hear. The girl prompted me for each new animal and participated at all the right places. Knowing my bus stop was approaching, I tried to cut a bit, but she kept reminding me, “No, you forgot the pig!” or whatever. I managed to end the story just as we got to my home stop and the entire front half of the bus burst into applause. I felt like a star. Several years later, I was at a college volleyball game and a woman spoke to me. She reminded me of that day, and told me she was the mother of that child. She said her daughter still remembers and talks about the lady who told her stories on the bus. The thought of that makes me proud. Of course, many storytellers have similar tales, and

she might have remembered it even without the props, but a three-year-old? I think the visual aspect of the story must have contributed to have that much impact on a child that young.

You have to be willing to look a little silly sometimes if you tell with puppets and props, but believe me, you will get people's attention, and it is worth it. You can transcend age differences and language barriers. If you don't take yourself too seriously, if you are having fun and are willing to play with your stories, those who listen are likely to have fun as well – and remember.

Useful Websites:

Puppets:

- Folkmanis: www.folkmanis.com My favorite puppets. Can be found at discounted prices from various sources.
- The Puppet Store: www.thepuppetstore.com I haven't used this site, but it seems to have a lot to choose from.

Instruments: I have found most of my noise makers secondhand, or by re-purposing other items, but you may have fun with some of the things available from these sites. My earliest sound effects, bought new, were a thunder drum and a kalimba.

- Music & Arts: www.musicarts.com
- Lone Star Percussion: www.lonestarpercussion.com

Laminators: A good quality hot laminator is wonderful, but you can get by with an inexpensive hand-cranked cold laminator. A wide variety are available online.

Sources for stories referred to in article: Most of the stories I refer to are folktales that have been retold and are widely available in many versions. Check your local library or consult *The Storyteller's Sourcebook* by Margaret Read MacDonald. I have given authors or sources for ones that might be difficult to find.

- *Tiddalick /The Biggest Frog in Australia* (Australia)
- *Stone Soup* (Europe)
- *Froggie Went a-Courtin'* - a traditional song (England)
- *The Cat on the Dovrefell* (Norway)
- *Gingerbread Boy* (America; similar to other European stories of runaway food)
- *Elegant Rooster/Rooster Who Went to His Uncle's Wedding* by Alma Flor Ada. (Cuba)
- *The Little Old Lady Who is not Afraid of Anything* by Linda D. Williams
- *The Little Red Hen* (England, America)
- *The Enormous Turnip/The Gigantic Turnip*. Originally by Leo Tolstoy, often retold.
- *"The Lady in Green," retold in Three Minute Tales* by Margaret Read MacDonald and other sources. (China)
- *The Lion and the Mouse* (Aesop's Fables)
- *The Blind Men and the Elephant* (India)
- *Sam and the Tigers/Little Black Sambo* by Helen Bannerman
- *The Jade Stone: A Chinese Folktale* by Caryn Yacowitz and Ju-Hong Chen (China)
- "The Official Who Judged a Stone." I have not found this story retold in either picturebook or anthology. I first read it in a Chinese language textbook when I was in college and heard it again, told by a fourth-grade student in Gengcun, on a storytellers' trip to China led by Eth-Noh-Tec in 2006.
- *The Grateful Bird/The Two Brothers* (Korea)
- *The Firebird* (Russia)

- *The Squeaky Door* by Margaret Read MacDonald. Also available in other versions.

Useful Storytelling How-To and Why-to Books for beginning tellers, librarian tellers, teacher tellers, and telling with puppets and props:

Benton, Gail and Trisha Waichulaitis. *Ready-to-Go Storytimes: Fingerplays, Scripts, Patterns, Music and More.* Chicago: Neal-Schuman Publishers: 2003.

This is a first-stop how-to book for librarians if you want to stretch your storytimes beyond your current comfort zone. Patterns, music and everything else you need to lift your stories off of the page in the direction of performance is right here. After you learn to work with these, try to adapt your own stories following their example.

Cohen, Arlene. *Stories on the Move: Integrating Literature and Movement with Children, from Infants to Age 14.* Santa Barbara CA: Libraries Unlimited: 2007

Includes a variety of techniques for incorporating movement and stories, for a wide range of ages.

De Las Casas, Dianne. *Handmade Tales: Stories to Make and Take.* Santa Barbara CA: Libraries Unlimited: 2008.

Introduces simple hand stories, string stories, draw and tell stories, cut and tell stories, paper-folding stories and more. Learn to create simple props you can use in your telling, and then show the audience how to do it and send them home ready to tell for themselves.

De Las Casas, Dianne. *Tell Along Tales! Playing with Participation Stories.* Santa Barbara CA: Libraries Unlimited: 2011

Begins with background on how and why to tell stories, and advice on audience management and audience participation. Includes

several adaptations of traditional tales, with advice on participatory technique.

Faurot, Kimberly K. *Books in Bloom: Creative Patterns and Props that Bring Stories to Life*. Chicago: American Library Association, 2003.

Carefully designed patterns with copyright permissions included for librarians who wish to make their own patterns, felt board pieces, puppets- finger, hand, and stick – each designed to go with a specific children’s picture book. Addresses the reasons why “propping” a story is effective, how to choose which stories to prop, and how to do justice to the original picture book text and illustrations while adapting it for retelling with props.

Freeman, Judy. *Once Upon a Time: Using Storytelling, Creative Drama, and Reader’s Theater with Children in Grades PreK-6*. Santa Barbara CA: Libraries Unlimited: 2007.

Includes recommendations of books to use for storytelling or reader’s theater, tips on techniques, advice on getting children to create their own dramatic interpretations of stories, and advice on making the story your own.

Fujita, Hiroko, with Fran Stallings. *Stories to Play With: Kid’s Tales Told with Puppets, Paper, Toys and Imagination*. Little Rock, AK: August House Inc.: 1999.

A Japanese and an American teller teamed up to tell stories in tandem travelling around Japan and the United States for several years. This is a result of their collaboration: simple stories with simple props to make yourself, lots of participation, and fun in any language.

Glover, Anne. *Anne Glover’s How to Make the Dog! And Other Favorite String Tricks*. DVD. 2006.

Anne Glover is a phenomenal storyteller and a phenomenal string artist. This DVD teaches you the tricks of making the string

figures. I don't know of anyone who can do what she does, but maybe you can incorporate some of these figures into your stories.

Huff, Mary Jo. *Story Play: Building Language and Literacy One Story at a Time.* Lewisville, NC : Gryphon House Inc.: 2011.

Makes the vital link between stories and developing early literacy skills: how and why preschool storytime, storytelling and story play contribute to a child's readiness to succeed in the classroom.

MacDonald, Margaret Read. *Shake-It-Up Tales! Stories to Sing, Dance, Drum and Act Out.* Little Rock, AK: August House Inc.: 2000.

You don't have to be musical to add rhythm and movement to your stories. Percussion instruments are wonderful props to add to your telling. Chant, establish a beat, and get yourself and your audience up and moving, even if you can't carry a tune.

MacDonald, Margaret Read, ed. *Tell the World: Storytelling Across Language Barriers.* Santa Barbara CA: Libraries Unlimited: 2008.

An inspiring array of experienced tellers describe techniques for telling when the teller speaks one language and the audience another: through a translator, tandem telling, telling visually rather than verbally, with a sign language interpreter, with a teller speaking what is to them a second language, etc. Experiences include working with tellers or audiences speaking English, Japanese, Chinese, Thai, Tagalog, Spanish, Portuguese, Swedish, Welsh and more.

MacDonald, Margaret Read. *Twenty Tellable Tales: Audience Participation Folktales for the Beginning Storyteller.* Revised ed, Chicago: American Library Association, 2005.

Several of MacDonald's books are perfect for beginning storytellers, as she recasts the stories into a tellable format and includes notes on how to tell them. This one stresses repetition, audience participation, and physicality in telling. See also: *The Story-Teller's Start-Up Book.* Little Rock, AK: August House Inc.: 1993.

McGowan, Tara M. *The Kamishibai Classroom: Engaging Multiple Literacies through the Art of "Paper Theater."* Santa Barbara CA: Libraries Unlimited: 2010.

Kamishibai is a form of Japanese street storytelling illustrated with a series of dramatically-presented pictures depicting scenes from the stories. When skillfully done, it is riveting. This volume describes creating images to illustrate stories, primarily within the classroom context.

Miller, Teresa et al. *Joining In: An Anthology of Audience Participation Stories and How to Tell Them.* Somerville, MA: Yellow Moon Press, 1988.

Tellers share their favorite participatory versions of original or traditional stories, with sidebar comments on how to invite audience participation. Useful not only for the specific stories but for what you can learn about making your own telling more participatory.

Norfolk, Sherry, Jane Stenson and Diane Williams. *The Storytelling Classroom: Applications Across the Curriculum.* Santa Barbara CA: Libraries Unlimited: 2006.

A stellar array of professional tellers and teachers provide a grade-level approach to telling, from preschool to middle school. Links national curriculum standards to tried and true techniques to show that storytelling "is a power tool for education."

Sierra, Judy. *The Flannel Board Storytelling Book.* 2d ed. New York: H. W. Wilson: 1997.

The simplest way for a librarian to move from reading aloud to telling is through flannel board. Sierra uses simple outline figures that you can re-create in felt, copy on cardstock, color in, laminate and use with Velcro or magnet, or adapt in other ways. She provides simple, attractive retellings that make it easy for you to present the story in your own words.

Sierra, Judy. *Multicultural Folktales: Stories to Tell Young Children.* 1991.

Includes stories, patterns, advice on storytelling technique, and telling with felt board and puppets.

Sima, Judy and Kevin Cordi. *Raising Voices: Creating Youth Storytelling Groups and Troupes.* Santa Barbara CA: Libraries Unlimited: 2003.

A step beyond telling stories to children – teaching children to tell. The ultimate guide to working with a group of upper elementary, middle or high school students and teaching them to perform as tellers in a range of settings.

Stotter, Ruth. *A Loop of String: String Stories and String Stunts: Traditional and Original String Figures and Stories.* Berkeley CA: Regent Press: 2009

Includes very brief stories that incorporate string figures, with detailed illustrated instructions on making the string figures.



Vicky Dworkin began storytelling almost 25 years ago while working as a librarian in Hawaii. Eventually, she founded the Moonlight Storytellers, a swap group for both professional and kitchen table tellers. She has retired to Sandwich, New Hampshire, having spent many summers on Squam Lake. Now a part-time freelance teller, a member of the Central New Hampshire Storytelling Guild, the New Hampshire Storytelling Alliance, and Northeast Storytelling, she is in the process of starting a Lakes Region storytelling circle. She loves intimate telling to children with puppets and props and is learning to tell family stories to adults. She can be reached at vicky.dworkin@gmail.com.

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