

# Object Theatre

Let's explore how we can use everyday objects from around the home to act out and perform a story.

## WHAT IS OBJECT THEATRE

Object theatre (sometimes referred to as object puppetry) uses everyday / found objects to create a story. Instead of specially designed props, objects and / or puppets, object theatre uses an everyday object. The objects could be used 'as is' or could be transformed into other things which, to be successful, requires both the skill of the performer and the imagination of the audience.

These are the key features of the style from the [World Encyclopedia of Puppetry Arts](#):

- The untransformed "thing" is explored, either in itself (to find its inherent movement/physical properties) or to use as a character/symbol in a story.
- The practice is not confined to puppetry, but shared with allied fields, including dance and performance art.
- Since any object can become a puppet, a trip to the second hand store or a quick tour around one's home can become the basis for a performance or figures for a political protest piece.
- find the possibilities in movement, sound, and character (where used) for the object. A scarf becomes a "dancer", a hat becomes "authority", and white plastic packaging pellets become "snow".
- Though performances may use full stage, many performances are presented on a tabletop with one narrator/manipulator presenting all the "object-characters" and with his/her own voice.
- Because of the abstraction already implicit in the choice of an object as living/talking/performing, the genre invites the audience into non-literal thinking. Metaphor, metonymy, humour, and poetic thinking are evoked by the genre.
- Performers may present with a simple set of objects in the open air or elaborate offerings that mix objects, shadow figures, projections, sound, and light design.
- The form offers opportunities for humour and playful creativity and the genre works well in workshops with children, youth and community groups.

The same source explains how object theatre is developed through workshops. Here are some the workshop style activities they describe which may help further our understanding of this style:

- **PLAY LIKE A CHILD AND FIND THE 'MOVEMENT' OF THE OBJECT.** This style of workshop reminds us that the toy or object as already a puppet. In fact, a number of practitioners in this style may use toys as characters.  
e.g. Figures like the iconic American "Barbie" doll have been deconstructed (literally and figuratively) onstage to talk about objectification of woman. Barbie's wealth of "things" (house, car, boyfriend, etc.) has allowed her to become an easy tool for comment on materialism.
- **FIND THE 'MOVEMENT' OF THE OBJECT AND CONSTRUCT ITS 'CHARACTER'.** This workshop asks us to discover the animation possibilities of the object.  
e.g. New York based Jane Catherine Shaw's presentations of *Folk Tales of Asia and Africa* used kitchen utensils to tell her tale. In the telling of Greek myth, cloth curtains

represented the iconic heroes and heroines. These explorations may depart from the iconic use of the object within the real-life frame and explore or cast it based on its movement or sound characteristics that may or may not relate to its actual use.

In other instances, of course, the object might be used rather literally. The policeman's truncheon becomes an image of power and force.

## **OBJECT THEATRE WARM-UP IDEAS**

### **ACTIVITY: This is a ....**

A fun, drama game in which students transform everyday objects. Stand with students in a circle. Take, for example, a roll of masking-tape. Tell students, 'this isn't a roll of tape, this is a camera' and use the object as a camera. Pass the object to the next person. They need to come up with something different again, saying 'this isn't a roll of tape, this is a ...' and then they act out the transformed version of the object. It is passed along again and so on until the object has been transformed by the entire class. Remind student that there is no right or wrong. Students are only limited by their imagination.

Variation: Place a blanket or sheet in the middle of the circle. Tell students they can enter, one at a time, and transform that object. In this variation, the activity is completely non-verbal. Students will perform with the transformed version of the blanket (maybe it becomes a skirt on a ballroom dancer or a baby or a gondola).

Online Learning Option: This activity could be played online via video conferencing. Give students 30 seconds to grab something from the house and return to the screen. Each student can show their chosen to the camera but not as it is – the need to transform as they present it to the rest of the class.

### **ACTIVITY: Yes, Let's**

A well-known drama game which can be used as a physical and mental warm-up. This game is a good way to encourage students to think creatively whilst introducing improvisation skills (thinking on their feet, accepting and making offers etc.) Ask students to move around the room in a neutral way. Call out a student's name. The chosen student instructs the class, e.g. "Let's all be chickens." The entire class responds with an enthusiastic and loud, "Yes! Let's!" and then follow the instruction – in this case, becoming a chicken. When all the students are doing the activity, choose another and continue until the whole class has had a turn at instructing the class.

Online Learning Option: Get students up and out of their seats and try this out via your video conferencing tool.

## OBJECT THEATRE WORKSHOP

### Object Theatre Improvisation:

- Gather a random collection of objects, enough for one per student.
- Place the items on a table and ask students to, without consultation, take one object each.
- Put students into small groups and ask them to create a short scene (beginning, middle and end) in which all the objects are used as they should be (e.g. a fan is used to cool someone down, a plate is used to serve dinner – that sort of thing).
- View the performances. Discuss how the props were used; did the audience need to use their imaginations all that much? Why? Why not?

### Next Step

- Now, challenge the groups to create a new scene in which the objects are transformed and used in a more imaginative fashion. Depending on the year level / experience of our students you may like them to:
  - Use the object as what it actually is and then transform it into something entirely different (e.g. we see the plate used to serve dinner and then it becomes a UFO hovering overhead)
  - Transform the object multiple times during the improvisation
  - Transform the object multiple times, however each transformation is, in some way, linked to the one before it (quite a challenge)
- View the scenes and discuss:
  - How were the objects transformed?
  - What worked and what didn't work? Why?
  - What performance skills were needed to create this scene?
  - Were these the 'right' objects? If you could swap them out for a different object what would you choose and why?

Variation and Online Learning Option: This can be adapted to a solo style performance, which students can prepare and film / share with the class.

- Ask students to choose 3 to 5 random objects from around their house and direct them through the same activities as above.
- Firstly, start with using the objects as what they are (again, could be a very simple 'scene' about eating dinner or getting ready in the morning or making toast – anything that uses all the objects in the way they are supposed to be used).
- Then, move into the more difficult scene of transforming the objects into things they are not.
- Compare and contrast the two scenes.

### Understanding Objects

Ask students to choose an object to be displayed in a museum 100 years from now. They will present their object to a small group (or the class) as if they are the museum curator or tour guide.

After presenting the object, the class may ask questions directly to the object. The presenter should respond as if they are the object.

## **Objects Represent Characters**

Consider this quote: “Everyday objects displace traditional crafted realistic or fantasy figures – a little girl might be represented by a napkin; a box becomes a pulpit, a gurney, or a church. Because they are free of an imposed personality/identity, mundane objects activate the imagination and creative intelligence of puppeteer and audience.” (World Arts West)

You may like to bring in a selection of objects for students to choose from or, alternatively, ask students to bring in an object that they feel represents them. Sit in a circle with the students and ask them, one at a time, to show their object and say; “This is me. I am a (name the object) because (reason).”

Alternatively, you may like students to choose an object they feel represents a character from a story you are currently reading or a fairy tale.

Once all students have presented, you may like to discuss the importance and significance of objects.

## **Finding the Movement**

Ask students to choose an object. It could be a toy or an everyday object. Or, try out how the activity works using a combination of the two. A toy already has a character attached to it – consider if this makes the activity more or less challenging.

Students should explore how this object moves. Taking into account any movement/s intrinsic to the object itself (e.g. you can manipulate a corkscrew or a doll with moveable arms / legs) and the movement you can give it (e.g. the way you can screw up a piece of paper into a ball).

Explore the different ways in which this object can move.

And then, consider how this object could be moved to represent:

- An elderly character
- A young character
- A villain
- A superhero
- A heavy, big person
- A small person, light on their feet
- An animal
- A ghost or spirit

Ask students to choose another object and find its movement ... now, let those two object characters interact – no words, just sounds and movement.

## **Objects and Meaning**

- You may like to bring in a selection of objects for students to choose from or, alternatively, ask students to bring in an object that they feel represents them. Sit in a circle with the students and ask them, one at a time, to show their object and say; “This is me. I am a (name the object) because (reason).”

- Alternatively, you may like students to choose an object they feel represents a character from a story you are currently reading or a fairy tale.
- Discuss the importance and significance of objects. Consider how objects can become symbols of a theme or issue (love, death, war etc.).
- Find everyday objects that can symbolise and stand in place for themes or issues.

## TABLE TOP THEATRE

Table Top Theatre is a form of object theatre – the performance, as the name suggests, would take place on a table top.

UK theatre company, Forced Entertainment, has used this performance style to recreate Shakespeare's stories.

"A salt and pepper pot for the king and queen. A ruler for the prince. A spoon for a servant. Lighter fluid for the innkeeper. A water bottle for the messenger ..." ([www.forcedentertainment.com](http://www.forcedentertainment.com))

You can watch Forced Entertainment's artistic director, Tim Etchells, discuss The Making of Complete Works: Table Top Shakespeare on YouTube here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=z1PfMfu5R-E>

You can find trailers and extracts of the Complete Works: Table Top Shakespeare via Forced Entertainment's YouTube Channel here: <https://www.youtube.com/playlist?list=PL-blz3DjyJlwH7hWmHod1qB9MezbUt6c7>

Discuss:

- Performance and Expressive Skills: what do you see and hear the performers do?
- The choice of objects.
- A story you could develop into your own table-top performance.

Use the idea of **Table Top** as used as a basis for a solo or small group performance.

Students should choose objects they feel represent the characters of their story (be it a personal anecdote or a fairy tale) and use these as a starting point for their own in a table top theatre performance.