Grocery Bag Puppets: Anything Can Be a Puppet

One class period (~50 minutes) · Pairs · Middle School · Advanced Theater

At a Glance

Duration: One class period (~50 minutes). Runs long in a 40-minute period — trim share-out to 3 pairs and finish the rest the next day.

Group size: Pairs (teams of 2).

Standards:

- TH:Cr3.1.7.b — In an improvised or scripted drama/theatre work, develop effective physical and vocal traits of characters.
- TH:Cr1.1.8 — Imagine and explore multiple perspectives and solutions to staging problems in a drama/theatre work.

Students Will Be Able To

- Construct a functional human-figure puppet from three plastic grocery bags with a partner.
- Manipulate the puppet to walk, look around, and express two distinct emotions using only physical animation — no dialogue.
- Apply warm-up vocabulary (posture, gait, gaze, breath) from the space walk to puppet manipulation.

Materials

- 6–9 plastic grocery bags per pair (3 minimum for the puppet, extras in case of tears or redesigns)
- Open floor space, cleared of desks, large enough for the whole class to walk at once
- Optional: masking tape, rubber bands, scissors for attaching bags or reinforcing a head/joint
- Timer or music for the warm-up and rehearsal
- Exit ticket half-sheets or paper

> **Safety note: no bags over faces or heads at any point — set this expectation explicitly before bags are distributed.**

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Key Vocabulary

- **Object theatre** — performance in which everyday objects, rather than actors or traditional puppets, are animated to tell a story.
- **Animation (bringing to life)** — the illusion that an object is alive, created through breath, intention, and movement, not the material itself.
- **Gaze** — where a puppet appears to be looking; the single strongest signal of what it wants and how it feels.
- **Neutral** — a relaxed, alert physical baseline an actor or puppet returns to between choices.

Lesson Sequence

Time	Phase	What Happens
8 min	Warm-Up: Space Walk with Emotional Shifts	Neutral walk through the room; teacher calls shifting emotions/energies students must show head-to-toe.
7 min	Preamble: Anything Can Be a Puppet	Short discussion + examples establishing that any object becomes a puppet the moment it appears to want something.
10 min	Build Challenge: Three Bags, One Body	Pairs turn 3 plastic grocery bags into a human-figure puppet with a head, body, and moving parts.
10 min	Rehearsal: Bring It to Life	Pairs manipulate the puppet to walk, look around, and show two distinct emotions, using warm-up vocabulary.
10 min	Share-Out: Walk, Look, Feel	Each pair performs a 20–30 second sequence; audience names the emotions they read.
5 min	Reflection / Exit Ticket	Individual written reflection on what made the puppet feel alive.

8 min 1. Warm-Up: Space Walk with Emotional Shifts

Students walk through the open space in neutral — no talking, no set paths, filling empty space and avoiding collisions. Call out shifts every 20–30 seconds, giving students a moment to let each one land in the whole body before naming the next:

- **Energy/tempo:** molasses-slow → rushing to catch a bus → drifting half-asleep
- **Emotion:** curious and searching → suddenly delighted → nervous and small → proud and tall
- **Focus:** follow something moving above you → avoid being seen → look for someone specific in the crowd

Side-coach with questions rather than answers: “What does your spine do when you're proud? Where does your gaze go when you're nervous?” Close with 20 seconds of neutral to reset the room.

Why it matters: every physical choice named here — gait, gaze, posture, tempo — is exactly what students will need to hand off to a puppet that has no face of its own.

7 min 2. Preamble: Anything Can Be a Puppet

Gather the class and pose the question directly: “What's the least likely object you've ever seen come alive on stage or screen?” Take 3–4 quick answers — students often land on things like a candlestick, a lamp, a broom, a sock, a shadow.

Introduce (or confirm) the idea: an object becomes a puppet the instant it seems to want something and struggles physically to get it. The illusion comes from breath, gaze, and intention — not from how detailed or expensive the object is. A cardboard box, a spoon, and a plastic bag are all fair game.

Name today's material and task: three plastic grocery bags, one partner, one human-figure puppet that can walk, look around, and feel things.

10 min 3. Build Challenge: Three Bags, One Body

In pairs, students turn exactly three plastic bags into a human-figure puppet with:

- A recognizable head and body
- At least one part a performer can move independently (a head that turns, an arm that gestures, legs that can step)

Give the design decisions to the students — how the bags become a head versus a body, whether one performer manipulates or both share the puppet, whether hands go inside handles or the puppet is held from below. Circulate and ask questions (“How will it look up?”) rather than supplying solutions.

10 min 4. Rehearsal: Bring It to Life

Pairs rehearse a wordless sequence in which the puppet:

- Walks across the personal space available to the pair
- Looks around — searching, noticing, reacting to something
- Shows two distinct emotions back to back, using only movement

Coach pairs to borrow directly from the warm-up: “What did proud do to your spine? Give that to the puppet.” Remind performers to keep their own face neutral or hidden behind the puppet so all the expression reads through the object.

10 min 5. Share-Out: Walk, Look, Feel

Each pair performs their 20–30 second sequence for the class. After each, ask the audience for one word naming an emotion they saw and where in the puppet's body they saw it. Keep feedback fast and physical (“the shoulders,” “the way it turned its head”) rather than general praise.

5 min 6. Reflection / Exit Ticket

Students respond individually in writing:

- What single physical choice made your puppet feel alive rather than just held up?
- Which emotion was hardest to show without a face, and what did you do about it?

- Name one object outside this classroom you now think could be a puppet, and why.

Assessment: Look-Fors

Objective	Look-Fors	Not Yet
Constructs a functional puppet from 3 bags	Puppet has a clear head/body and at least one manipulable moving part (arm, head-turn, etc.)	Bags are worn/held with no distinct puppet form or moving part
Manipulates puppet to walk and look around	Puppet's "gaze" visibly leads the head; steps read as travel through space, not just bouncing in place	Puppet stays static or manipulator's own body "leaks" and upstages the puppet
Shows two distinct emotions physically	Posture, tempo, and gesture change clearly between the two emotions with no dialogue	Only one emotion shown, or emotions rely on the performer's face/voice instead of the puppet

Differentiation

Below Level / Needs Structure

Narrow the emotion choices to a provided pair (e.g., "curious" and "scared") and let the partner call out "walk / look / feel" cues during rehearsal.

Above Level / Ready for More

Add a constraint — the puppet must react to an invisible object the pair agrees on in advance, or the transition between the two emotions must be triggered by something specific the puppet notices.

Physical / Sensory Needs

Puppets can be manipulated from a seated position; the space walk can be adapted to in-place movement (upper body, wheels, hands) while keeping the same emotional prompts.

Teacher Notes

This lesson is deliberately light on set steps for the build itself — the design constraints (2 objectives, 3 bags, 2 performers) are what generate creative variety, not a set of instructions to follow. Resist the urge to show a "correct" puppet before pairs build; let the share-out surface the range of solutions instead.