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# Exploration of theatre and using puppets in the classroom| A study of creativity in teaching

Stephanie McLain  
*The University of Montana*

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EXPLORATION OF THEATRE AND USING PUPPETS IN THE  
CLASSROOM:

A STUDY OF CREATIVITY IN TEACHING

by

Stephanie McLain

B. Sc. MSU Northern 1995

presented in partial fulfillment of the requirements

for the degree of

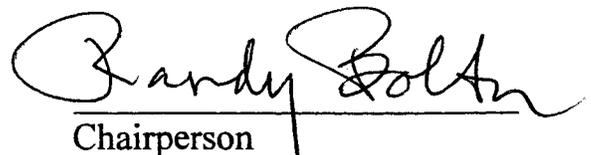
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The University of Montana

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Dean, Graduate School

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Exploration of Theatre and Using Puppets in the Classroom: A Study of Creativity in Teaching.

Chairperson: Dr. Randy Bolton



Most five year olds are confident they can draw, act, sing, dance and create. Within three to four years, children at some point, will experience a crisis of self confidence in all of these areas. The child will no longer feel creative or confident. Teachers are often partly to blame for their decreased tendencies to create. With the pressures of the “No Child Left Behind” act and intense testing , we are understandably programming them to continually come up with the “right” answers. It is crucial in today’s world that our children become critical thinkers as well as young people with strong values.

Our natural way to learn is by imitation. If we show students an image, it starts to cover up their own ideas that were starting to emerge. Teachers need to set up limitations. Limitations can be a good thing to motivate a child, like changing the media they are used to working with. This can force a new idea or a new way to solve problems to the surface.

To carefully look at changing the media to push creativity to the surface, the idea of using puppetry and theatre to teach second graders throughout the year was developed. The results were both exciting and outstanding. The confidence the children showed from the beginning of the year to the end of the year was largely measurable. Their growth in their own thoughts and ideas, instead of the adults and media around them, was incredible.

The next challenge in the project was to build a puppet theatre and construct puppets, while including the strict guidelines of the curriculum throughout the year. Once students tackle an assignment creatively, they naturally are curious about how others tackled the problem. The results were positive, fulfilling, and at times frustrating. The process is described and a diagram of the theatre and setup of the stage is included.

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## 1.

## The Launch

*“I don’t think I want to know a six-year-old who isn’t a dreamer, or a sillyheart. And I sure don’t want to know one who takes their student career seriously. Now here’s a quarter. Go downtown and have a rat gnaw that thing off your face.” ~John Candy in the movie Uncle Buck.*

Being a creative person, I continually am on a quest to find a different or more interesting way to teach our curriculum. I want to heighten my students’ interest as well as my own. The intent of my project was to construct a puppet theatre, as well as make my own puppets and use them in the classroom. As a final project, and to use as one of my parent contacts as our district requires at least nine parent contacts during the school year, was to put on a musical and puppet show. I also needed to include our explicit curriculum.

My role started out being the producer, director, set designer, dance choreographer, writer, costume designer and bathroom monitor of sixty second graders. I could see I was in over my head as we have a very demanding reading and writing curriculum, four science units, and an intense math program. I had a lot to accomplish before the end of the year, let alone put on a musical, play and puppet show. I knew I needed to learn the art of delegation. I asked the music teacher for help. She was very cooperative and taped all the music together on one tape and had the kids practice for over a month during

music class. She also helped direct the songs while the kids were on stage and I was directing the play and puppets. I had a large group of students who wanted to be square dancers in the play and I wanted the square dancers to be kind of special so I asked a retired teacher to come in and work with the kids. I explained to her what I would like to see. She did the choreography and worked with them for two weeks every last recess. My assistant had a degree in theatre so I put her to work with the kids and their expression and body language. Our district has guidelines as to what our assistants are allowed to do (no bulletin boards, correcting, cutting etc.). They are supposed to be working with the children at all times. I wasn't too worried about her losing working time with the kids as they read their parts over and over and worked on expression, things we would be working on anyway in the classroom.

My process started with my theme. Our second grade classes study growing plants and the solar system intensely as part of our science unit. I combined two plays I had used before. One was called "The Garden Show" by Ron Fink and John Heath and "How Does Your Garden Grow?". I chose these two as "How Does Your Garden Grow?" has some really nice songs about gardening that I thought would appeal to everyone, and "The Garden Show" had many songs in it the kids could enjoy and put a little pop culture into it. The songs, "Buzzed By A Bee" and "Tabloid Reporters" were favorites because the

kids enjoyed the tunes as well as the dancing. The plot of the play was aliens landing in a garden. The acts were, gardeners, square dancers, aliens, flowers, weeds, bees, Elvis, dirty kids, tabloid reporters and the space ship. We had nine songs to learn: they were, "Planting Seeds", "Chlorophyll Folks", "Dirt and Soil", "Buzzed By A Bee", "Weeds Rule", "Tabloid Reporters", "The Garden Hoedown" and "How Does Your Garden Grow?". I wrote speaking parts for the aliens and gardeners.

My next idea was to watch a d.v.d. I had borrowed from a local church that taught how to use puppets. Churches use puppets to teach children about the Bible and its parables, it's really an effective teaching tool for them. I took notes and also brought the d.v.d. to school so the kids could see first hand that I was also learning as we went along. I also researched the internet on ways to make puppets for myself as well as easier ones the children could make. I then had to start thinking of the sets and placement of the kids as I had over sixty children to work with and I needed it to be very organized. I put the singers on risers on the stage, the actors and dancers would come in front of the singers when cued. I wanted the parents to be able to see their own children as much as possible so we strategically placed the dancers. I put the puppet theatre on the gym floor and used it as a second stage.

I then had to decide on the cast. I needed four bees, nine weeds, four dirty kids, three alien puppeteers, four flowers, four reporters, three Elvis', three gardeners, two applause sign holders, one "throw money" sign holder, one set helper, nine square dancers, and a spaceship driver. I didn't pick children for parts until I saw what they were willing to do and give up. Aliens and gardeners had to give up different recesses for a month. Some were real shy and I wanted to respect that. Not all of us want to be the star. I included several other parts like applause sign holders, set helpers, sweepers, programs etc. so the shy kids could also be included.

My next hurdle was the costumes. I was on a very tight budget, as most teachers are, so I had to be creative. I also didn't want the parents to get into competition with each other so I didn't ask for much. When approached, I explained that the fancier the costume the more self conscious little kids will be, and they will sing quieter. I told them we would be making our own costumes and I'd ask if I needed odds and ends. Here's the process of how our costumes came together.

Bees: I went to K-Mart and bought four ladies' black turtlenecks on sale for \$.89 cents each. I then went to Ben Franklin and bought "Wonder Under" and ironed it to yellow material. I cut up strips of yellow material and ironed them onto the black shirts. I asked the kids to wear black pants if they

had them. Some of the parents found wings for the kids. I also bought foam crowns for the headpieces. I tried to think “out of the box” and I didn’t want antennae, so I told them they were “queen bees”, that’s why they had crowns.

**Weeds:** I used dark green butcher paper and twisted it around lightweight wires. I taped it on for security. It hung around the kids’ necks like Hawaiian Lei’s. I attached green construction paper leaves, crumpled them up and punched holes in them with a paper punch for dimension and they wore their jeans and t shirts.

**Gardeners:** I asked kids who I knew I’d seen in overalls to be gardeners. When considering these kids, I knew they would have to give up some recesses and were not too terribly shy. They wore their overalls and t-shirts and carried plastic shovels and rakes.

**Elvis and the Tabloid Reporters:** I did ask parents and teachers for small women’s business suits or jackets for the reporters and leather jackets for Elvis. The reporters carried money in their pockets and little notebooks with pencils behind their ears.

**Dirty Kids:** I took old mens' shirts (my husband's), cut them off and painted brown and black spots on them to look soiled. They just wore them over their regular clothes.

**Square Dancers:** The kids just wore their jeans and t-shirts and I provided them with bandanas.

Closer to the end of the year I had the kids just practice getting on and off the risers. We worked on safety and sound. We'd try it with noisy feet and then quiet feet. We all decided the best way was quieter and discussed the audience would be able to hear the puppets better if the kids on the risers were quieter. We also discussed proper riser behavior and etiquette. We had our regular rules, no pushing or shoving, name calling, listening at all times and watching me or the music teacher. We also discussed fainting, yawning, gum chewing, bathroom use and nose picking.

Then we (our three second grade classrooms) practiced for two weeks on and off singing the songs on stage. I then started working with the kids in my classroom and recesses. I let the kids explore my puppets throughout the year during a free time called "Choice". I invited other kids from the other two classrooms so they could get in on some of the puppet activities. I set down

some rules. We talked about being appropriate with the puppets and made up our own rules. Here's what the kids and I came up with together:

1. No hitting each other. (for some reason it seems to be the first thing children want to do with puppets is to fight the other puppet.)
2. Wash your hands so you don't get the puppets dirty.
3. Use appropriate language.

After the ground rules have been set I let them explore the puppets for about the first month, rotating children daily by interest. I have found there are some kids who do not want to use puppets at all. These kids would go on to a different activity. When I feel the kids have lost some interest in "playing", I then moved on to having them write short plays, practicing them and then finally performing in front of the class. This was to prepare them for our upcoming, end of the year play. They used a small collapsible puppet theatre to get used to the confinement.

This is what we discussed before they started writing their plays. We called them the 4 "W's":

Who is the main character(s)?

What is the play about?

Where is it happening?

Why is their life difficult?

Throughout the duration of the year during our Choice time, I would discuss puppet manipulation. I explained they didn't want a big lump of material on stage, they had to make it come to life. We discussed the movement

of fingers, wrists, elbows and sometimes shoulders. We discussed opening and closing the puppet's mouth with their fingers, walking, falling, laughing, crying, double takes, sleeping and sneezing. We practiced moving them with our ABC's, sang favorite songs, and recited poems. We talked about puppet posture and finding their natural position. The hardest to teach was requiring them to slant forward just a bit and a forward bend of the wrist so they'd look like they were looking straight ahead. We practiced looking out a window, looking at the floor, had it read books and had the other kids critique it. I had to stress daily to keep their puppets awake. If they let their arms go limp because they weren't the ones talking, it looked like their puppets had fallen asleep. It was also important that the puppet being talked to responded to the talking puppet with body language. This was where I feel we dropped the ball most of the time. By the time we got all the other things worked on, that was the least of the problems. We learned how to go on and off the stage by looking like we were going down stairs, escalators, through a trap door and just swooning or fainting out of a scene.

The scenery and props were very important to me and the kids to get the message across to our audience. We discussed it at length. The kids decided we'd need gardening tools, shiney objects for the aliens, paper mache' giant vegetables, and the set should have lots of greenery and flowers to look like a

garden. We placed watering cans and garden hoes on the sides of the stage with the oversized garden vegetables.

My next hurdle was the puppet theatre. This was another challenge as I am not spacially gifted. When I originally drew up my puppet theatre, the dimensions were much larger than I had anticipated. When I cut the pieces and glued the ends together it was too tall as well as wide. I literally went back to the drawing board and cut the pieces down. When I finished the theatre, it was better than I thought it would be. What I liked about it was I needed something that was easily transported, easily disassembled, lightweight, and could fit into my convertible. I used p.v.c. pipe for the frame. I covered the frame in fleece material and used Velcro strips to attach the fleece to the p.v.c. pipe. There is a diagram and instructions for the theatre's frame in the Appendix A and B.

The unexpected happened at this point. My first idea was to put the theatre up on table tops and have it as a second mini stage, as the main stage was occupied by risers, singers, dancers and actors. I approached my principal with the idea and she was understandably hesitant. Her concerns were if one of the kids fell through the puppet walls and off of the tables. I decided to put the theatre up on four layers of gym mats which made the theatre two feet up off of the ground. If I had to do it all over again, I would make it another half a foot higher. When the students watched the play it was easily seen, but when the

parents came in to see, they were all taller and couldn't see much of the puppets. I hadn't anticipated this.

The unexpected pleasant surprise was the parent interest. We live near the Chippewa Cree Reservation, and a lot of my students live in poverty. My parent involvement is low as they are mainly just trying to survive. What happened was over and above my expectations. My parent turnout was 80%. This was a much better percentage than my parent teacher conferences or parent night that was about 45%. I sent home parent notes as well as their children's parts to help them study and memorize. I've always had a hard time getting my parents to read with their child at home, but this was the one time they really took an interest. The parents' reactions to seeing their child up on stage was priceless. I saw a few tears as well as lots of laughter. The biggest laugh was when one of my shyest little girls held up the "throw money" sign.

Another unexpected and disappointing result was making my own puppets. It took a lot longer than I had expected. I started on a boy and a girl. These took months for me to make. I researched the internet on how to make them. They didn't turn out at all how I wanted. They were expensive too. I was running out of time and decided this was not going to work. I found what I wanted from a company and ordered three puppets. Two were neon colored and one was an older grandpa in a golf suit. I made them into my versions of aliens

by gluing bright and colorful sequins to them. They turned out exactly what I had hoped for and more professional looking. I have decided to pursue this project at a later time as I'm still interested. It surprised me that the puppet making was my first focus, but then the theatre and interactions became the main focus.

I kept in mind it really wasn't how the play turned out but the process of it all. We were all inspired by the process and the daily interaction with the materials. The reading, creating, singing, thinking, and developing self esteem was the most important. They were so proud of themselves.

## 2

## The Search

*“Of course you don’t know! You don’t know because only I know. If you knew and I didn’t know, then you’d be teaching me instead of me teaching you-and for a student to be teaching his teacher is presumptuous and rude. Do I make myself clear?” ~Mr. Turkentine from the movie Willy Wonka and the Chocolate Factory.*

Our curriculum is explicit and we are expected by our district to follow it. This is appropriate for our district as we have many new teachers. It is also appropriate for me as I need the structure and discipline. It also stifles me. I start to feel everything is redundant and familiar. I have been a little concerned that since our district has adopted the new curriculum and its explicit guidelines, I have put the kids under too much pressure to come up with the right ideas or answers. As a result, I have found them only concerned with the right answer and not opening or expanding their thinking or creativity. There was a competition between my students because they did not consider themselves a group. I blame a lot of the parents for this attitude. Half of the parents of the children in my classroom are very competitive, while the other half is very passive, if not negligent. When I introduced our play and the puppets everything started changing in my classroom as well as in the children and me. The kids instinctively knew this was going to be a

challenge and obviously one they were going to be expected to collaborate on. I also needed the challenge and creative outlet.

I found that I spent months planning this. I started in August, we didn't perform until April. I began sketching first to get my creative ideas flowing and to focus. I haven't sketched for a long time and it felt like a friend I hadn't seen in awhile. I was excited and rejuvenated to get back to something I used to love.

This project has reminded me of why I started teaching in the first place. I have found new ways to encourage and reassure my students when they are in doubt. I now tell them "it's a search". It is a search in all areas, art, music, math, language arts, and science. Mistakes are part of the search. I've learned how to explain how a project might look or move or be resolved, both verbally and physically. I've been forced to better explain the goals and reteach and remind them of their goals, as it was a long term project and we had to keep talking about our goal. I emphasize more on the process, not the end product. I resisted the temptation to show the end products to help explain when possible. This challenged the children to think more creatively. I took down a lot of my charts I had up, had the kids find out for themselves and make their own charts. It wasn't as tidy, but it looked more like their room, and they had ownership of it. I constantly tried new

ways to encourage creativity and imaginative thinking. I now have the kids observe more carefully, using their senses as I had taught them in acting. It applied to all areas.

During the project, we had to work together as a group. I am not into group building, as I'm not much of a team player myself, but it forced me to try ways that might work. Our classroom built a strong and supportive relationship. I found many more teachable moments than I had in the past. I no longer had images to fall back on to show them what a project would look like. I could not fall back on copy work. Sequencing and organizing became very important, almost like a choreography of the day as I had to work with so many personalities. I also learned a little bit more about delegation. I had to let go of some of the control. I kept in mind these ladies I worked with have years of expertise and in areas I lacked. I am able to communicate with the adults I work with a little better. This has always been a problem for me. Usually I don't take the time to communicate properly what it is I am looking for or want, and have ended up very disappointed. I also listened to their ideas. Listening is key.

As a creative teacher, it is my responsibility to review the results. I did even more so this year. I found myself thinking daily about how it could have been taught in a different and better way. This is something I haven't

done for a couple of years as I've gotten comfortable with the curriculum.

How this affected me most of all was how to combine my two passions, teaching and creating.

## 3.

## The Reach

*“If I could only have one food for the rest of my life? That’s easy. Cherry Pez. Cherry flavor Pez. There’s no doubt about it.”*

*~ Vern Tessio in the movie Stand By Me.*

Working on plays from the beginning of the year to the end of the year opened up many areas I hadn’t thought of. I had never considered a play as a print concept for second graders, and the kids really need exposure to many print concepts. When the children worked on their parts as well as other children’s parts, they experienced the alliteration or repetitious reading I had always encouraged. I continually expressed the importance of practice, practice, practice. I would ask how someone might get better at football, basketball, baseball, hockey, cooking, building, adding, subtracting, reading. They always knew the answer! I encouraged new vocabulary words when they wrote the play and had the kids who hadn’t experienced the words yet, look them up in the dictionary. Towards the end of the year we analyzed the elements of the literature. I saved the plays they wrote earlier in the year and we analyzed the plots, conflicts, resolutions, genre, characters, contrasting points of view, settings, cause and effect and the importance of reading with expression.

Another important component leading to the final performance was writing mini plays. This was practice for their larger performance. When the children were assigned to write plays, they experienced many different aspects of writing. The most important factor in writing exercises is that students need to be personally involved in order to make the learning experience of lasting value. When the children were told they were going to write and direct a play, they instantly became personally involved in their project. They had to ask themselves questions as they wrote the play. How do I want my readers to feel? Will my story hold their attention? Do my sentences begin in different ways? Did I use some long and short sentences? What is my message and is it clear? Was there some kind of interesting problem? Does the beginning of the play hook the reader? Do I have a strong conclusion that wraps up the story? Have I used unique words? Have I used colorful phrases? Did I repeat common words too many times? Did I leave spaces between words and sentences? Have I indented any new paragraphs? Of course this was introduced slowly, and with each new mini play we'd focus on a new lesson.

What I saw develop over the year was a type of democracy. The kids originally wanted their own way, fights would break out, and lots of

tears would appear. They would want to give up right away. I decided to divide the students into groups of three diverse kids, or at least as much as I could, by race, ability, and gender. I'd appoint one as the leader. I had them work on different aspects of puppetry. One group would work on movement, one on exiting, one on voice. Then they would come back to the classroom and report back to the rest of the group what they decided. I would have to float from group to group a lot the first couple of weeks, and as they grew more skillful, I had less input. We did this twice a week. I felt it was so effective and implemented it into the rest of our curriculum. As their interest and maturity increased so did their problem solving skills. I saw them brainstorming ways to solve their own problems. I did have to step in from time to time when there was a difficult child in the group, but even the difficult child started to appreciate the differing opinions and saw other kids' perspectives.

I wanted the kids to experience making their own puppets. We made puppets from checkbook boxes, clothespins, socks and sacks. While we made the puppets we talked about the elements of faces and how emotions are reflected in expressions and actions. People have enjoyed puppets for a long time. They have a universal appeal. Maybe

because they have the means of portraying action and emotions without the limitations we humans have.

What I also was very proud of was the different intelligences we touched on and continually referred to. I had a gifted child in my room and she was always a struggle for me, a struggle because I didn't know what to do with her as she was finished with two pages before half of my class even had their name on their papers. Then I introduced her to writing plays and spent some time with her using poems. It became clear to me she had a keen knowledge of the sounds of words (phonology) and their musical interactions with one another. She understood the rules of words and their inflections (syntax). She loved working with language. She played with language. She would be endlessly looking through dictionaries for words.

“In the poet's struggles over the wording of a line or stanza, one sees at work some central aspects of linguistic intelligences. The poet must be superlatively sensitive to the shades of meanings of a word; indeed, rather than shaving off connotations, he must try to preserve as many of the sought after meanings as possible.” (Gardner,75) .

Of course the musical intelligence played a big role. What was interesting to me was they found out that certain songs had a mood. They talked about pitch, tempo, beat etc. in music class, but this became more. They wanted to know how to set the mood so we could fit it into our

play. I talked to the music teacher and she helped me develop a vocabulary. Talk about teachable moments! The children showed me where to go with this and what to teach. We talked about andante (slow, walking pace), crescendo (gradually getting louder), presto (very fast), and mesto (sad). I learned right along with the kids this whole year.

The bodily kinesthetic intelligence was very dominant in many of my children. They moved well and I was surprised at their muscle memory and their well developed sense of balance. They learned the square dance in a matter of a few days. I thought it was interesting that the ones who are athletic on the playground volunteered for the dancing parts.

The interpersonal intelligence really came through when I grouped the kids up to work on their different play parts. Most second graders are still somewhat egotistic. There were a small portion of children who understood the moods of the other children and how to deal with them. They tried hard to build team relationships. I have two emotionally disturbed children in my classroom who display many of the other intelligences, but the interpersonal intelligence is the one area they are completely void of. My concern for them is, how will they achieve what they want to in life without this intelligence? They have no sense of self

or cannot see personal matters from any of the other students' views. It was interesting to watch the kids try and work out their problems throughout the duration of the year, especially during the performance practices.

As education continues to assume more and more of the responsibility of guiding, nurturing and developing our children, teachers have found themselves faced with the issue of self-esteem. A critical relationship exists between self-esteem and the development of one's potential. Abram Maslow diagrams the hierarchical nature of human needs. Self esteem is one of the basic needs towards self actualization. A teacher who is aware of the relationship between self esteem and learning can and will, find interesting experiences that challenge students and offer them many chances for success, (Starko 86).

One of my little second grade boys, Drake, is Native American. He is a wonderful little boy. He has been retained twice and did very well this year. At home things were not sane. He comes to school late (46 times this year), missed many days of school, he's continually hungry and very tired, he's developed some serious nervous tics, his mom gives him sleeping pills so she can party, and there's a lot of abuse from passing "friends". Our school has turned the mother in

numerous times. During our play, Drake expressed an interest in being an alien puppet. I explained this was going to require a lot of work and practice and giving up recesses. He still wanted to do it. I gave him the lead in the play. He was terrific. I never regretted my choice. I constantly told him he was “my star” and he had to try to get himself to school on his own. He still was late, but not absent. He was constantly looking for his mom during the performance. I knew she would not be there. When we finished the show, at the cast party, he looked up at me, put his arm around my waist and said, “I was pretty good, wasn’t I?” I could tell this was the first time he actually felt good about himself. I leaned down and told him he was going to have to be the one to make himself feel important in life, and yes, he was wonderful.

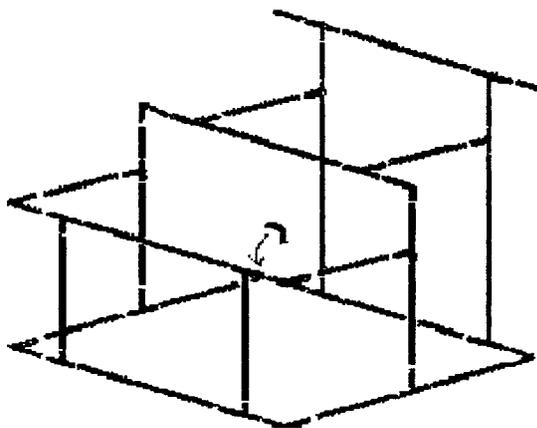
## Appendix A

### The Puppet Theatre Design

The theatre design is simple to make, and easy to assemble, disassemble and transport. It is made from PVC pipe, available at most hardware stores. These are my measurements, but you may want to make it higher, wider, or three tiered for more puppets and children.

I used: (5) 36" pipes  
(4) 12" pipes  
(6) 27" pipes  
(1) 48" pipe  
(1) 75" pipe  
(6) elbows  
(1) cross connectors  
(4) "T" connectors  
Lots of Velcro

The stage I developed is set up to accommodate 3 children and all their puppets and props. The stage in this diagram is three tiered and set up for more children and puppets. I chose the smaller of the two as I needed the space. This puppet theatre is from the website in the references as Burley N.



## Appendix B

### The Covering

The curtain to cover the puppet theatre can be any color, as long as it's opaque. I made sure I could see the puppets against it. Mine was a little busy, so I put a yard of black material on the top bar where the puppets performed. I measured the bars and figured out how much material I would need. I covered the entire theatre with fleece, using black for the entire backdrop. I attached the fleece to the PVC pipe with Velcro. After the kids entered the theatre, they could shut themselves in by attaching the velcroed material to the pipe. This conserves the “magic” of the puppets.

## Appendix C

Kids' Comments (taken from the video camera at the cast party)

"It was totally fun and my mom was there!"

"I was really good wasn't I?"

"I was so embarrassed."

"My wings fell off and I didn't even cry, Mrs. McLain."

"I'm so glad I didn't faint like that one third grade kid did, remember he just fell over , whoosh, and hit the dirt."

"Kyle was singing way too loud in my ear."

"I had to yawn and I did it without opening my mouth wide open."

"Do we have to do it again?"

"The puppets were the best, don'tcha think?"

"Nah uh, the weeds ruled!"

"No sir, the square dancers did the best cuz everyone clapped and cheered."

"Could I have seconds on the cookies and juice and cheese?"

"Is it time to go home yet?"

"I liked the part where the bees danced and shook their hineys."

"Do we get to do another play in third grade?"

"I don't wanna, I'm gonna move to Great Falls."

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