Learning Guide
Introduction

In the theater, the *siteline* refers to the area the audience can see onstage. This publication is designed to expand the normal sightlines to allow students to see some of the processes and ideas that went into creating this Puppet Co. production of *Hansel and Gretel*. Through better understanding of the creative process, we hope students will develop a greater appreciation of the ancient art of puppetry.

A Brief History of Puppetry

There are puppet traditions all over the world, developing in different ways and at different rates, with diverse results. Asian puppetry started many hundreds of years ago, particularly with shadow puppets, where flat rod puppets throw shadows on a screen between the puppeteer and the audience. Japanese puppetry theater, called *Bunraku*, developed rapidly in the 17th and 18th centuries into the most elaborate puppet theater in the world.

European and African puppetry is thought to have developed out of religious rituals, with totems and idols evolving into the moving figures. Making and performing these figures became a folk art, which is still largely the case in African culture. In Europe, puppetry gained acceptance in the Theatre and both imitated and innovated conventions of the “legitimate” stage. Today there are puppets on television, in theaters, used in movies for special effects. Types of shows range from simple library shows to expensive Broadway productions like *Disney’s The Lion King*.

“You cannot separate the history of puppets from the history of theatre in the same way as you cannot separate the theatre’s history from the history of humanity.”

--P. C. Ferrigni

Ravan chhaya (Shadow puppetry)
Types of Puppets

In traditional puppet theater, there are three basic types of puppets: Hand Puppets, Rod Puppets, and Marionettes.

There are two types of Hand Puppets and they both fit over the puppeteer’s hand. In the glove type of Hand Puppet, the puppeteer’s fingers operate the puppet’s head and arms, and sometimes the feet. Glove puppets are the most commonly known of all the puppet types around the world. Punch and Judy are the most famous glove puppets. Kermit the Frog is a mouth style of hand puppet, sometimes called a sock puppet. Most of the puppets you see on television today are Hand Puppets.

The mouth puppet is so called because the puppeteer’s fingers hold the puppet’s head in place while the puppeteer’s thumb moves the puppet’s lower jaw down away from the head, to open and close the puppet’s mouth. The puppeteer’s wrist is the puppet’s neck and the remainder of the puppeteer’s forearm is the puppet’s body.

Sometimes, a mouth puppet will cover the puppeteer’s entire body. The puppeteer moves the mouth from inside the puppet. Sesame Street’s Big Bird is this kind of mouth puppet.

Rod Puppets work above the puppeteer’s head, on rods or sticks. A main rod goes up through the puppet’s body and attaches inside the head. Turning the rod from side to side moves the head left or right. A string may run along the rod to the head, to make it rock up and down, which helps the puppet look like it’s talking or looking around. Some puppets have strings that go up to the puppet’s eyelids, ears, jaw, and nose so they can move, too. Long, thin rods attach to the puppet’s hands so the puppeteer can control its hands and arms.

Several examples of rod puppets, made by American puppeteer Marjorie Batchelder McPharlin in the 1930s.
Marionettes, or string puppets, are worked in front of and below the puppeteer. The puppeteer moves controller sticks and pulls the strings to make the puppet walk, turn its head, move its arms, and much more.

Sometimes only one string runs from the control stick to the puppet’s figure. Most puppets have an average of six to ten strings, but some can have fifty strings or more! Sometimes the strings are only a few inches long. Other puppets may have strings that are several feet long.

The puppeteer stands on a platform that is called a bridge. The bridge is a special platform that stands above the floor, called the stage. Sometimes the bridge is only a few feet above the stage floor. Sometimes the bridge can be eight feet high or higher.

Combination or hybrid puppets mix two or more different puppet types to make a new kind of puppet. For example, some mouth puppets have rods or sticks to move their arms. Bert is an example of a mouth-and-rod puppet. Some puppets can be large costumed characters with masks. Many puppet makers look for new ways to mix different types of puppets to make new and interesting ways for puppeteers to perform.

Puppets are made of many different materials, including wood, fabric, papier-mâché, or porcelain, as well as different types of plastic, metal, and rubber.

When we design a new puppet or restore an older puppet at the Puppet Co., we usually start with a clay model of the puppet’s head and hands. Then we cover the models with a layer of a material like papier-mâché, or cast the model in a plaster mold. When the molded piece is hard, we sand, paint and assemble the pieces according to the type of puppet we are making. Finally, we add costumes and, if the puppet is a Marionette, we attach the strings.
About the Story

There are two very different versions of the story of *Hansel and Gretel*. You and your students are most likely to be familiar with the version found in the tales of the Brothers Grimm. In their version, Hansel and Gretel are unfortunate to have a particularly mean stepmother. She deliberately gets the children lost in the forest, hoping that they will perish. Instead, the children find a beautiful house made of gingerbread and all kinds of sweets.

It is the house of a witch who bakes children into gingerbread! She tries to ensnare the children, but they outwit her and she ends up getting baked into gingerbread herself! The children find that there is treasure in the house and rush home with their goodies. Their father tells them that the stepmother has fallen down the well, and they live happily ever after.

That is NOT the version of the story that you will be seeing. Ours is a considerably more gentle and kind version of the story.

We have adapted our show from an opera version of *Hansel and Gretel*, written by German composer Engelbert Humperdinck in 1892. The idea for creating this adaptation came from Humperdinck’s sister, Adelheid Wette (pronounced “Vetta”), who wanted to create a Christmas entertainment for her children.
In rewriting the story, Adelheid Wette replaced the wicked stepmother with a mother who is good and caring. The mother comes home from trying to sell her needlework to find that her children have been singing and dancing and have not done their chores. She becomes angry and sends the children to the woods beyond the hill to pick strawberries for their dinner, unaware of the Gingerbread Witch who lives there.

From this point, our story is very similar to that of the Brothers Grimm, except that the children, their father, AND their mother have a joyful reunion at the end of the show.

You will also hear some of Humperdinck’s wonderful music in the performance, including the song “Brother come and Dance with Me,” and several others.

Engelbert Humperdinck
Hansel and Gretel is a marionette, or string puppet, play. All of the characters are marionettes, also called string puppets, because they are controlled by strings that go from the puppet’s body to a controller that looks like a model airplane.

You will see Christopher Piper perform in Hansel and Gretel. Christopher is one of the founders of the Puppet Co. and he has dedicated his life to puppetry and performance. He is a second-generation puppeteer. His parents, Len and Pat Piper, were also puppeteers. They did many performances in Hawaii, where Christopher and his three brothers grew up. The four brothers often performed with their parents.

This version of story was passed down to Christopher by his parents; however, Christopher Piper made the marionettes used in this production. He is truly a Master Puppeteer.

In this performance he not only operates (or manipulates) the puppets that you’ll see, he also provides all of their voices and personalities.
Before the Show

1. Read both versions of *Hansel and Gretel*’s story to your students as the stories appear in this guide. If your students are worried that the witch might be too scary, assure them that she is more silly than scary, and that she comes to a very sweet end.

2. If you can, listen to a recording of the music from Humperdinck’s opera *Hansel and Gretel*. You should be able to find a recording in your school library, local public library, or online. There are various versions on YouTube.com, but many are in German. You can see a performance, in English, of the song *Brother Come and Dance with Me* at [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tGa6aDF3ds4](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tGa6aDF3ds4) (our version is a bit shorter).

3. Explain to your students that they are going to see *marionettes* (puppets on strings) perform the story. Tell them that the gentleman performing the puppets is a *puppeteer*.

4. Tell your students that there will be a brief introduction to the show, before the story begins, explaining a bit more about how our version came to be.

5. Seeing a performance can be an exciting experience. Remind your students of the rules of theater etiquette, which you will find at the end of this Learning Guide.
After the Show

There is a lot of fun, music, and whimsical magic in *Hansel and Gretel*, but there are also messages about caring and responsibility.

1. Talk to your students about some of the chores and responsibilities they have at home or in the classroom.

2. Talk to your students about how parents and teachers do work that might be considered “chores” or “homework,” and that sometimes doing that work really means everyone has a happier home or classroom environment.

3. If you can find the music to “Brother Come and Dance with Me,” have your students pair off and try to perform the dance. It’s easy and the instructions for the dance are in the lyrics to the song.

4. Talk about how stories told with song lyrics are different or similar to stories that are told without singing or music.
Theater Etiquette

A visit to the Puppet Co. Playhouse may be the very first trip to any theatrical performance for some of your students. We want this to be a happy experience for everyone. Before you enter the theater, our House Manager (the person who is responsible for your safety and comfort during the performance) will welcome you, and will tell you about the seating for you group. Please listen to the House Manager’s instructions and follow them as you find your seats in the Playhouse.

At some Puppet Co. performances, a performer may come out to introduce the show and remind everyone about theater “manners” using this easy to remember poem:

Please don’t eat, and stay down in you seat.  
Don’t walk about, and don’t talk or shout.  
Don’t take pictures or touch the display fixtures,  
And, if the babies bawl, take them down the hall!

Have a great visit to the Puppet Co. Playhouse!