



TEACHER NOTES

The production of Hercules uses puppets to create the creatures who populate the worlds of the story. These range from handheld bird puppets, large scale Hydra heads manipulated by individual actors to create fight scenes, through to full body costumes worn by an actor such as the Cyclops and Hell Hound. These activities are designed for Key Stage 3 and 4 students to explore the skills needed to design and operate puppets.

Whatever type of puppet is used, there are some fundamental rules that the puppeteers and performers should follow. These are:

THE PUPPET MUST BREATHE

Breath gives the impression of life, and if the puppet stops breathing, the audience will no longer suspend their disbelief or engage in the style of storytelling. Your own breath can also be helpful in anticipating how and when you and other puppeteers will move. An out breath can be the signal to move, for example, and an in breath might signal the puppet character's reaction to something they hear or see.

PUPPETEERS DO NOT HAVE TO BE CONCEALED

However, they must ensure that their eye gaze is always on the puppet, rather than the other characters on stage. This assists in focusing the audience's attention on the puppet, and ensures that where the puppet is operated by two or more people, the movements (and sometimes vocal sounds) are coordinated and well-executed.

THE PUPPET MUST ALWAYS BE ANIMATED IN FRONT OF AN AUDIENCE

Be aware of how the puppet enters and exits the stage and make sure that the puppet is fully out of sight before allowing it to return to its inanimate state. It would be a shame to lose the effects you have created for an audience by not following the actions through to the end!



PUPPETRY

1. FOUND OBJECTS: CREATING A FLOCK OF BIRDS

Puppets can be made of any inanimate object. The puppets in Hercules were made by specialist puppet makers from around the world, but many puppet designers are also interested in how puppets can be created from found objects, which also makes the art more sustainable!

ACTIVITY

In this task, you are going to create and perform a flock of birds, similar to the birds that you see on Mount Olympus in *Hercules*. The task begins with some physical exercise without puppets, and then moves to using found objects to depict the birds flying from stage left to stage right.

ENSEMBLE MOVEMENT

One person leads this game. This could be a student, or class teacher. The aim of the game is to create an ensemble of performers who can move together to suggest a flock of birds. Throughout the game, everyone walks or jogs around the room. They should do this neutrally (without trying to create any particular character or narrative) until the leader calls one of the commands on the right.

EXTENSION

To add higher stakes to the game, the last person to respond correctly to the command is out. However, you could simply run this as a fun exercise where no one 'loses'.

Once you've played the game for a few minutes, you could change leader (who calls the commands) and play again. You might also like to record the game so that you can see how an audience might experience watching this movement.

COMMANDS YOU NEED TO KNOW

- ✦ **MOVE** Walk or jog around the room. Change directions to avoid bumping into people, or becoming too linear or predictable in your movement.
- ✦ **STOP** Stop where you are and freeze until given another command.
- ✦ **CENTRE** You all move safely to the centre of the room and form a tight group. Make sure you do this at a safe speed. Stay in this huddle until a different command is called.
- ✦ **DISPERSE** Everyone spreads out to different parts of the room.
- ✦ **STAGE LEFT** Everyone moves to the stage left part of the room (agree beforehand where this is) and sits down.
- ✦ **STAGE RIGHT** Everyone moves to stage right and strikes a heroic pose.
- ✦ **NAME CALL** The leader of the game calls the name of one of the game participants. Everyone else must locate and then follow that person until the leader calls a different command. Try to get as close to the leader as is possible and safe, but do not move ahead of them.
- ✦ **EARTH** Participants continue moving but as close to the ground as possible.
- ✦ **WIND** Players move as if fighting against a strong wind
- ✦ **FIRE** Everyone moves as if the floor is on fire.
- ✦ **AIR** Participants move as if they are as high in the air as possible. This could include walking on 'clouds', being as tall as possible, or floating on a light breeze.

1. FOUND OBJECTS: CREATING A FLOCK OF BIRDS



Scene render showing the scale of the Hydra puppet in Hercules

FINDING OBJECTS

You now need to find objects from which you can create a flock of birds. These can be:

- ✦ Pieces of paper folded to look like birds. (These can be origami paper cranes, or paper that is scrunched, folded or rolled to form different parts of the bird, for example.)
- ✦ Hardback or paperback books
- ✦ Pieces of cloth or clothing
- ✦ Paper fans
- ✦ Umbrellas
- ✦ Toys (these don't have to be toy birds!)
- ✦ Plastic or polythene bags

There is no limit to what you might use as long as it is safe to use it and you have the owner's permission.

Once you've found your object(s), experiment with how you can animate it. For example, how can you manipulate the covers of a hardback book to make the bird 'fly'? If using a piece of clothing, where will you need to hold it to create its shape or convey a sense of being aerodynamic? Does the fabric stretch and contract with each flap of its 'wings'? Work with a partner to evaluate each other's movement choices and begin to develop the movement style for each bird. As an extension, explore how you can create the bird's take-off and landing. How does it walk on the ground?

CREATING YOUR FLOCK

Once you've found the movement vocabulary for your bird, gather the whole group together and repeat the game from point 1. This time, you are not the focus of the game, but your bird puppet is! For example, with the NAME CALL command, the change in who is leading the group will create a 'murmuration' of your birds – the grouping and shape of the flock as it changes direction. You'll also start to see how the birds move together when the earth, wind, fire or air command is called.

Record this game, and then evaluate how you can use this activity to create an extended performance that involves your flock of beautiful and unique birds.

2. MODULAR PUPPETS: CREATING A MONSTER

ACTIVITY

In this task, we're going to create a puppet which consist of several different shapes which, when combined, become a full character. The puppet of Hades is the inspiration for this task.



YOU WILL NEED:

- ✦ Pens, pencils, crayons or paint.
- ✦ Scissors.
- ✦ Glue.
- ✦ Craft items such as feathers, beads, thread, felt etc for decoration of the puppet.
- ✦ Rods, skewers, canes or straws to create the operating rod.
- ✦ Stiff paper or cardboard, which can be A3 or A4 depending on the desired size of the puppet and the time available.

**If using natural materials like bamboo or wooden sticks, ask an adult to blunt the sharp or rough ends, or wrap them in tape to prevent injury.*

STEP 1 DRAW A CREATURE OR MONSTER

Greek myths are full of monsters and fantastical creatures. You could take inspiration from some of the creatures which are combinations of different animals, such as Pegasus, Cerberus or a satyr. As you're drawing, consider which parts of the animal are the most important part of their character. For example, do they have horns which suggest power and violence? Do they have large hands (like Hades) that can smash even the hardest rock? Make sure your drawing is big enough to include a lot of detail. It will be helpful in the next stage of the puppet design.

STEP 2 SIMPLIFY YOUR CREATURE

Choose a maximum of three features of your creature or monster. They should be the most important characteristics. The audience does not need to see every single detail to believe that the puppet is real, but ensure that you include a head/face which will lead the movement and expression.



PUPPETRY

2. MODULAR PUPPETS: CREATING A MONSTER

STEP 3 CREATE A TEMPLATE

This is where you will create four to five pieces for your puppet, out of cardboard. Each section will be cut out, and stuck to a straw, wooden skewer, bamboo cane or pencil*. Whilst you're creating your template, look at the production shots of Hades on page 4, to remind you how each piece came together to create the larger puppet version of the character.

Decorate each section according to the body part and the character of the creature you are depicting. If it's a soft, friendly character then felt, feathers or light-reflective beads might be appropriate. If your character is scary, tough or reptilian, you might prefer to use collaging techniques, sandpaper or knotted threads to create a rough, intimidating appearance. Remember to attach the rod on the rear of the template so the audience can't see the join.

Note: You'll be working close to the puppet. Make sure that you stand back and consider how visible your design is to an audience who might be sitting quite far away. Think about how each piece of the puppet looks on its own AND how it looks when the pieces are next to each other. Clarity of lines is important, so consider this when designing and decorating your creature.

STEP 4 ANIMATING YOUR PUPPET

Before you start to rehearse using your puppet, write down words that describe the movements you want to achieve from the creature. For example:

- ✦ Swooping
- ✦ Attacking
- ✦ Floating
- ✦ Staccato
- ✦ Heavy
- ✦ Pecking

Although you're not showing the full body of the creature, you can still think carefully about how the puppeteers will operate their sections of the puppet to create the desired movement dynamics.

Assemble your team of puppeteers, one person holding one section of the puppet. Slowly and carefully work through the following tasks:

- ✦ Moving the puppet pieces towards each other to form the full creature. Ensure that the puppet is facing towards your intended audience. Rehearse this until it is a smooth process. You can then practise breaking the puppet apart again, either gracefully or aggressively depending on the type of creature you have created.
- ✦ Creating the sense of breath. Once the puppet is 'formed' (i.e. the pieces are next to each other to form face and body of the creature) the puppet must breathe, coordinate how each piece will move to show how the creature inhales and exhales. Decide on whether one or more of your puppeteers will vocalise the breathing so the audience can hear it. Breathing can be an excellent indicator of the character's mood and intentions!
- ✦ Create a short sequence in which your creature sees something and responds to it. For example, when Hades sees Hercules and Zeus his head jerks backwards but then leers forwards as if to breathe heavily into their faces. As you move through this sequence, ensure that the movement is clear enough to the audience – you may need to pause for a moment, or create the sense of the eyes following something from left to right, before any emotional response takes place. If you have created hands or arms, how will you use them to communicate emotion?
- ✦ Create a scene in which the two creatures meet. Team up with another member of your class or group to make this scene. Introduce some kind of conflict: for example, one creature has something the other one wants, or one wants to intimidate the other. Considering the puppetry rules above, and the clarity of your narrative, rehearse your scene and share it with an audience. Ask your audience for feedback on how to clarify your puppet's character as well as the story you were trying to tell.