

# A guide to making

● Amy Hall

The Puppeteers' Cooperative is a group of artists and puppeteers who work across the US and Canada. They contribute to pageants and parades for festivals and community groups. Their work includes themed pieces for processions. The group offer a guide to making giant puppets, and ideas for themed displays. We have taken one of the 68 giant puppets in the guide, with details on how to make each piece, and reprinted it here.

Jo's ladies

### A backpack puppet

Backpack puppets are built on a pole which is attached to a backpack, which is worn like a regular backpack. The advantage is that the movement is very natural; the puppet simply does everything you do. The disadvantage is that it takes help to put on.

**Note:** The easiest way to make a backpack puppet is to buy a backpack frame second hand and screw or tape it to the upright.

### Materials

#### Papier Mache

Almost any kind of paper can be used for papier mache. Heavy paper (as in paper bags) is good to use because it is stronger, and therefore requires fewer layers, and can be smoother. Coloured paper, cloth, or shiny wrapping paper can be used in the last layer instead of paint. Use larger pieces on flatter areas, and smaller, thinner pieces on rounded areas. If the paper wrinkles or refuses to lie flat, your pieces are too large. Paste can be wheat-paste, wallpaper paste (cellulose is good but be careful to read the cautions, as some irritates the skin) or cornstarch cooked until it thickens according to the instructions on the box. Adding white glue to any of these pastes makes them stronger and more water resistance.

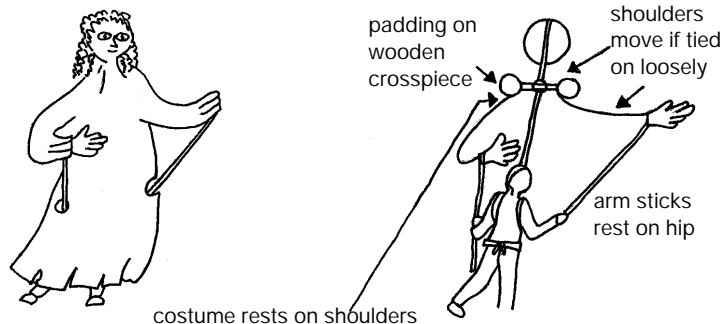
#### Tape

The best tape to use is gaffer tape (also known as duct tape). Masking tape can also be useful (see the heads section).

#### Paint

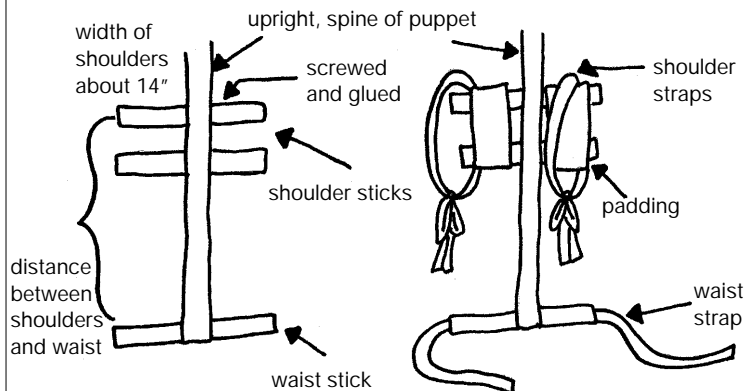
School suppliers usually carry cheap bulk acrylics, which are fine for puppets. On no account paint outside puppets with tempera.

### The Finished Puppet



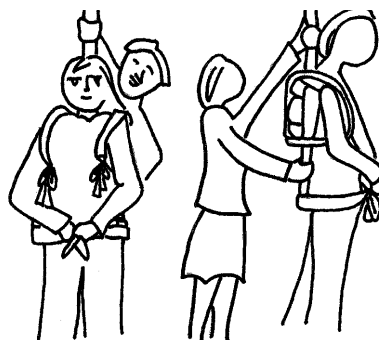
### Making a homemade backpack

1

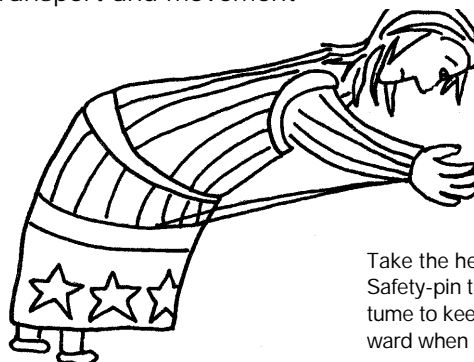


2

### Putting it on



### Transport and movement

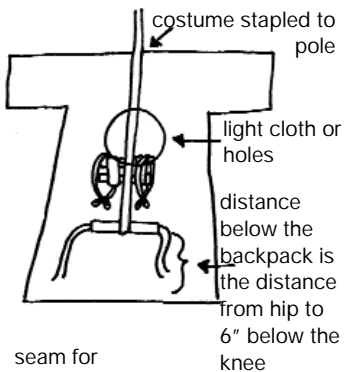


Take the head off for transporting. Safety-pin the neck cloth to the costume to keep the chin from falling forward when the puppet bends over.

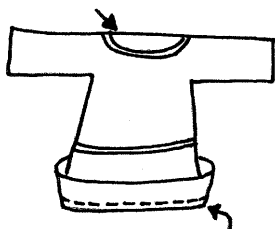
# giant puppets

## Costumes

It is important that costumes be made of light cloth; every ounce counts. If the cloth is light enough, it may act as a scrim: it will be possible to see from the dark inside the puppet out, but not from the outside in. It is also possible to inset curtain cloth into the costume as a viewport, or to conceal holes in the cloth's pattern, or behind a fringe. Fringes and draping are useful in general; they both conceal the simplicity of the shape and add to the movement. Puppets shaped by the arms and shoulders tend to look more dynamic, and puppet costumes shaped by hoops tend to look more funny and frivolous.



seam for shoulder wire



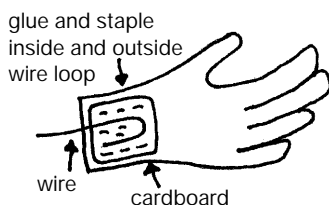
sew seams to put wire in

**Note:** A backpack puppet with an eight-foot upright takes about twelve yards of cloth for the costume and hair.

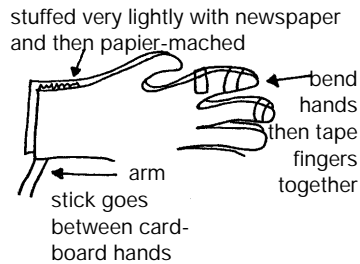
## Hands

If you have clay, you can make hands out of clay, cover it with thin plastic, and do 3-5 layers of papier mache with heavy paper. You will probably have to cut them off the clay and papier mache them back together.

## Cardboard single hand



## Cardboard double hand



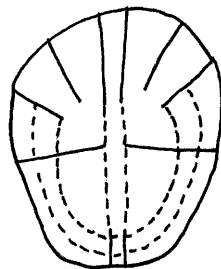
## Heads

If you have enough clay, create a face in clay and cover it with thin plastic and then with 3-5 layers of papier mache. You may have to cut it to get it off the clay, and then papier mache it back together.

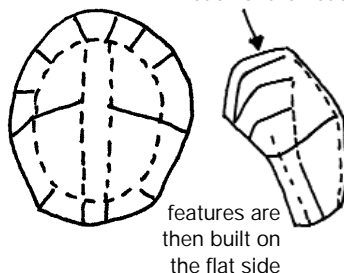
If you don't have enough clay, you can make a cardboard armature and sculpt the face on it in crumpled newspaper and masking tape. Do a layer of newspaper papier mache, adjust the sculpture, and do a couple of layers in heavy paper. When the paper dries, you can cut into the cardboard in the inside of the face and pull the crumpled newspaper out to make the head lighter.

The easiest way of putting these armatures together is with a staple gun. If you are putting them together with tape, use plenty of white glue in the overlapping areas, and tape the overlaps together over the edge of the cardboard instead of across the overlap.

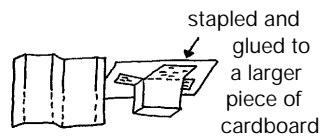
Heavy lines mean to cut and overlap, gluing and stapling, or gluing and taping. Dotted lines mean to score, cutting and lightly bending.



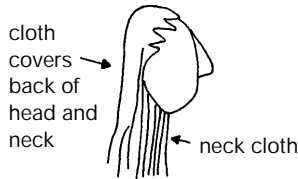
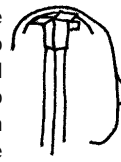
long tabs on top are folded to make the top and back of the head



## Attaching heads



the box should be loose enough to let the head move, but not so loose that it can spin on the pole



This method of attaching the head is particularly useful if you want to remove it during transport.

## Materials

### Hand-held staplers

It is possible to put together giant puppets without hand-held staplers (also known as staple pliers, or a staple gun), but they are extremely useful. An alternative would be a cable gun.

### Cloth

Cloth is usually the most expensive element of any giant puppet. Your local theatre might know the nearest source of cheap cloth. Lining cloth can be good, as it is light and shiny and comes in bright colours.

### Wood

Bamboo is good for most puppets.

### Wire

You will need heavy wire for puppets, probably 9 gauge or 12c gauge (the higher the gauge the lighter the wire).

**Notes:** You can find a copy of *68 Ways to Make Giant Puppets* at the **Puppeteers' Cooperative** website: <http://www.gis.net/~puppetco/> or you can get a photocopy of the guide for US\$4 or a video for \$10 by **contacting:** Sarah Peattie, 181 Tremont Street, Somerville, MA 02143, USA (+1 617 628 2499; email 0002136581@mcimail.com), or: Theresa Linniham, 3396 12th Avenue, Brooklyn, NY, USA (+1 718 853 7360).