

# Zero is hero, says math puppet

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The puppet is one of the most remarkable and ingenious inventions of man. It has been said that a puppet has to be more than his live counterpart; for it is definitely the suggestive element that is more captivating and enduring in a puppet.

We use the word puppet loosely to refer to somebody who doesn't have individuality, but Padmini, in her spacious office in Chikkadpallya at the Spoorthy Theatre, goes a step ahead and gives individuality to a puppet. It is a viewers' bonanza, with bright puppets looking so real that they even start conversing with you! She does not necessarily follow the traditional string puppets, but has customised puppets which are an amalgamation of the old and new. Her puppets can be people, trees, animate and inanimate, and 'zero' who is the hero! A lively personality, she can breathe life into any puppet she holds.

Making academics easy is her passion and that brought her into this profession, which started off with designing 'talking dolls' for her child - a typical three-year-old with queries. She owes it all to the child who nurtured and gave birth to the puppet-maker in her.

Encouraged and inspired by her father, a theatre personality who has been a constant guide through these years, Padmini is just grateful to the Almighty who gave her the will to cling on to this hobby and made it big in life. She performs for students of all age groups, including the underprivileged, and trains teachers in puppetry, apart from giving tips on parenting, all of course through her puppets.

## How did you start Spoorthy?

I started taking my puppets to people in 2003 itself, but it was only in 2005 that I got Spoorthy registered as an or-



Padmini with her puppets

ganisation. My child is my true inspiration. Talking puppets are easily accepted by everyone, especially kids. It is with these humane dolls that I could effortlessly find an entry into their hearts. Indian tradition has always encouraged story telling as the best way of communicating.

## Is it because of the teaching background that you took to this easily?

Teaching has always fascinated me and I always figured out innovative ways of teaching right from the age of five, when I had to teach those younger to me. My world was dolls and rags and creating new costumes for them.

## Is your puppetry similar to ventriloquism?

Not exactly; in ventriloquism you cannot see lip movements, whereas my audience knows that it is me who is speaking through the puppets.

## What were your initial projects?

Initially I was into academ-



A talking doll with hands

ics only; engaging and entertaining school kids. That was because I used to see the initial love and passion for math wane off in students as they progress in grades.

That's when I started 'zero is hero', the friend who addresses math phobia. Fractions, decimals, geometrical shapes and many more concepts are reinforced through this fun way.

I also made a 'Measurement Family' which was taken by one of the schools, where the grandfather of the family introduces the other members of the family to students.

Several schools appreciated this. I have seen, as a teacher with a variety of students (including housewives, elderly etc), puppets make learning interesting and impactful.

My first project was when the government approached me to do a puppet show on domestic workers for National Domestic Workers Movement (Secunderabad). I did the show without taking sides and it was well-received. I also did one on child labour, but sadly nothing much is happening for them.

Apart from all this, the show that moved me in a most unexpected way was the one I did against suicides and interpersonal relationships for CBIT students. It was a great learning experience for me, when I got a touching feedback from the students, saying that I addressed their issues very well and they could see a ray of hope through my show.

It shocked me because my feedback forms only had questions on the technical aspects of the show. That was an eye-opener.

## A word about your past projects and also the languages you conduct shows in?

The Tipu Sultan puppet you see here are for the Urdu Academy, which I did for them to save and promote the language. It was spearheaded by noted theatre artiste Girish Karnad and I did the puppet show for them. Telugu language revival measures are being taken by the government now, but we have been doing this for quite some time. I am Tamilian, born and brought up in Hubli; so I can speak Kannada, Tamil, Hindi and English fluently. I even read and write Telugu but I prefer taking professional help for good scripts.

## What are your forthcoming projects?

We are very excited that Sphoorthi Theatre has got a new assignment with Human Action for Rural Development -HARD, an organisation with a Fellowship Programme with Oxfam & Nokia called Create to Inspire for 2012-2013. Apart from this all my free time goes into digging out new concepts and ideas to make puppets more interesting and interactive.

## So is this puppetry building story telling skills too?

Yes, because I hold the puppet and ask students to narrate the story in present tense. I keep nodding the crow's head so long as the tense is maintained and stop if they go wrong. This way the student is attentive and pauses to make necessary corrections while narrating the story.

## Have you been upgrading puppetry skills through any programs or workshops?

I don't mean to be flippant, but after attending one such course, I felt there wasn't anything I really learnt. Hence, for me it's mostly learning through my audience and nature!