

# ME AND MY SHADOWS

## - Shadow Puppetry for Everyone!

*by Shelley King*

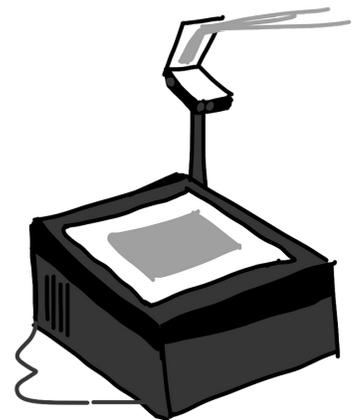
If you've ever jumped in front of a beam of light to make an animal shadow with your hands, you're already familiar with the basics of shadow puppetry! Only 3 things are needed for shadow puppetry - a light source, a surface to project the image onto, and an object for casting a shadow.

If you'd like to get a little more versatile than hand shadows, here are some simple ideas to get you started with the art of shadow puppetry. 😊

### Light Sources

Different light sources create different results for casting shadows. A very direct light creates sharp and clear shadow puppet images. A more diffuse light creates softer, less distinct images. Placement of light sources make a big difference in the quality of imagery and the ease with which the shadow puppeteers can perform without their own arms, hands, heads or bodies getting in the way and casting unwanted shadows on the screen. Experiment with different types of lighting and consider what will work best for the shadow puppet production you wish to create.

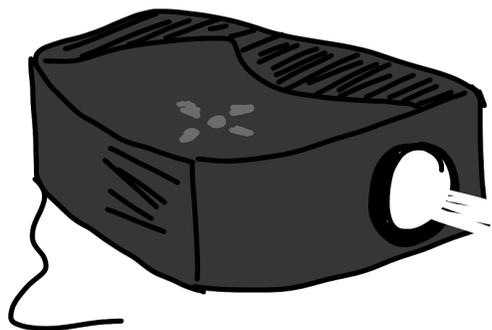
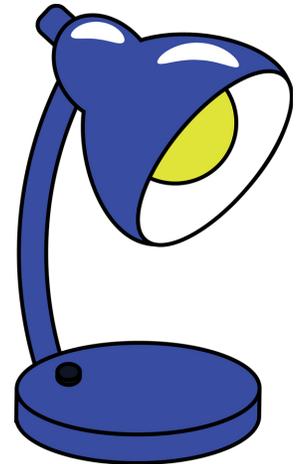
In general, the light source for shadow puppetry is most effective if the light is "focussed". That's why I love to use an **overhead projector**. The light can be directed right onto a screen, it offers the advantage of an even distribution of light, and provides lots of opportunity for creativity. Acetate sheets or a clear plastic "cranky" scroll offers lots of creative options for background images and settings.



A **table lamp** is easy for a modest table-top performance but you'll need to experiment with the placement of the lamp in order to produce a clear and crisp image.

An **adjustable lamp** with a clamp can be attached to the frame of a shadow puppet screen and makes it easy for the shadow puppeteers to stay out of the light themselves, so they are not casting their own shadows.

Generally, the best placement for an adjustable lamp is at the centre of the top of the screen, above and in front of the performer. This can be an inexpensive, portable and easy to use solution for many shadow puppet productions.



**Digital projectors** connected to a computer make it possible for background images to be stored and projected onto the shadow puppet screen. You'll need compatible software for your computer, so do some homework before investing, to make sure this is the best solution for you.

Even a **flash light** can be effective for spontaneous shadow puppet shows. You'll need a person with a steady hand to direct the light where it is needed. You can create some fun effects such as an earthquake, vibrations, or explosions by jiggling the flashlight at the appropriate time in the show.



## Shadow Puppet Screens

Shadow puppet screens do not need to be complicated or expensive. Depending on the size of your production and the anticipated size of your audience, one of the following screen material options are likely to work well. You will need to create a frame for the screening material to attach to, so the screen is taut.

Here is a backstage view of my shadow puppet screen on a wooden frame with a white plastic shower curtain liner as my screen material of choice. The frame is simply clamped to a table for easy use and transporting. The black curtaining around the screen,



dresses up the stage and helps to keep the shadow puppeteers hidden.

I designed my frame to fold in the middle (the top & bottom part of the frame is hinged) so it fits into my car. I use a white plastic shower curtain liner for my screening material.

## Screen Material Options

### White Art Paper

The advantages of white art paper is that it's inexpensive, readily available and easy to cut and attach to a frame. The disadvantages is that it tears easily and can't be cleaned if it gets dirty. It works well for a small "cardboard box" puppet screen and is a fun project to do with children. A roll of white art paper can be purchased at most art & craft stores.

## White Sheeting/Fabric

The advantages of using white cotton sheeting for a screen, is that it's inexpensive, readily available, and sturdy. The disadvantages is that cotton or cotton blend doesn't diffuse the light well and lets too much light through the fabric, causing a bright spot that can be annoying to the audience.

Also - it's hard to see the images clearly if you are watching the shadow puppets on an angle. A cotton sheet screen generally works well as a "doorway" shadow puppet theatre. You can tack a white cotton sheet to the door frame, creating a quick shadow puppet stage. It's a great activity for kids. It's not hard to find a white cotton bed sheet in thrift stores. Fabric stores have lots of white cotton fabric options.

## White Plastic Shower Curtain Liner

The **advantages** of using a white plastic shower curtain liner is that it is inexpensive, readily available, sturdy, attaches easily to a wood frame (use a heavy duty staple gun), and diffuses light much better than fabric. A disadvantage is, If you are transporting the screen a lot, or if it is being treated roughly, the plastic can puncture. For the "casual" workshops and performances I do in classrooms and for small audiences, it works great!

## RoscoScreen Twin-White (High Quality Professional Choice)

**Advantages:** This material is made exclusively for front and back image projection. It is a sturdy and cleanable plastic with great light diffusion. The **disadvantage** is that it's no longer available to purchase by the yard and the minimum size is 100 square feet and is approximately \$500 US plus shipping. If you're still interested, Eric at Kinetic Artistry ([www.kineticartistry.com](http://www.kineticartistry.com)) is a store located in Tacoma Park, Maryland that offers outstanding customer service and will ship to Canada and the US.

**Screen material** needs to be attached to a **wooden frame**, unless you're making a "cardboard box" shadow puppet screen with your child. When your screen is in use, the frame will have to be clamped to a table to support it.

## Shadow Puppets

A broad definition of a traditional shadow puppet is a “two-dimensional figure held against a translucent screen and lit from behind so the audience on the opposite side of the screen can see the shadows that are created.

The bodies of traditional shadow puppets are usually made from animal hides or parchment (pigs, goats, donkeys or fish). It is much more common for shadow puppets today, to be made from strong card stock, plastic acetate or thin plywood.

As a caregiver, educator, social worker, or community arts facilitator working with people who are new to shadow puppetry, I want to keep things easy for you, so our conversation here will be about making shadow puppets from heavy card stock.

## Is Bigger Better?

When making decisions about the size of your shadow puppet figures, you need to consider the “scene” that is being performed and whether the character or object is in the foreground or the background. If it is in the foreground (up close), the character will need to be larger than anything that is appearing in the background. Background characters and objects will appear smaller because they are further away.

Another consideration is whether the shadow puppets will be held against the shadow puppet screen or if they will be laying against the surface of an overhead projector. The overhead projector projects things so they are very large, which means the shadow puppet may need to be quite small depending on the scale of everything else. If you are using an overhead projector, it is ideal if you can set up the projector and screen while you are making your puppets, so you can see the actual projected size and make your decisions based on that.

In the photos below, the actual size of the wolf shadow puppet is 6 inches high and the actual size of the house is 4 ½ inches high. In both photos, the house is sitting on the surface of the overhead projector and is being projected much larger than actual size. In photo #1, the wolf is also sitting on the surface of the overhead projector. In photo #2, the wolf is being held against the screen so we are seeing it's actual size. It's a lot of fun to play with the scale of the puppets and it can open us lots of create opportunities in your storytelling.



## So Many Possibilities!

The shadow puppets you make can be as simple or complex as you want them to be. The houses in the photos above are very simple. They were drawn on card stock and then cut out. By cutting openings for the windows, bricks and sticks, it adds some detail and interest. A rod is attached so the houses can be moved on and off the screen easily.

The wolf is slightly more complex in that it has a moveable arm that is jointed at the shoulder. One rod supports the wolf's body and a second rod is attached to the arm, so the puppeteer can make the arm move. Some puppets have lots of jointed parts, but it takes a lot of practice to move them smoothly and to position the puppet so several rods aren't casting their shadows, detracting from the main image.



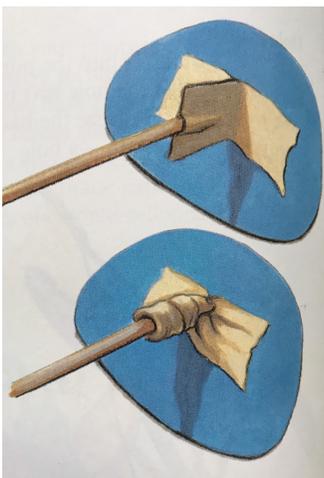
Shadow puppets can have colour if you wish! By using white card stock instead of a dark colour, you can add coloured detail to the shadow puppets with markers. The bunny and frog are made this way in this photo. The butterfly has a stained glass appearance, by cutting openings in the wings and attaching coloured tissue paper.

It's also fun to attach feathers, lace or different types of trim to shadow puppets to create the illusion of hair, a fancy dress, etc. Just experiment and see where your explorations take you!

## Attaching Rods

Lots of things can be used as rods, but barbecue skewers are great because they are long enough (8 to 12 inches), strong enough not to bend or break, and are readily available and inexpensive.

Depending on the position of the puppeteer and the desired placement of the shadow puppet, you'll need to consider the best placement of the rod. The object is to avoid having shadows of the hands and arms of the puppeteer on the screen. If you are holding the shadow puppet against the shadow puppet screen, you have greater versatility and control if you use the "hinge" method of attaching the rod, shown below.



Simply tear off a piece of masking tape about 1" long. Place half the piece of tape on the back of the shadow puppet, in the position you desire. Press the other half of the piece of tape onto the rod. Repeat on the other side, with a second piece of tape. Wrapping a third piece of masking tape around the rod, helps to add extra strength.

I hope you have fun playing with these ideas and creating your own shadow puppet performances!