

Puppetry Pedagogy in the Digital Age: A Strategy for Effective Storytelling in Contemporary Theatre

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ABSTRACT

Exploring puppetry pedagogy as a learner-centered experiential training to enhance creative storytelling in the digital age demands for artistic and technical competence to bridge the communicative and aesthetic function of theatre in education. Puppetry pedagogy transcends the manual manipulation and the traditional display of puppets to its effective usage as a teaching and learning strategy through sentient design, construction and manipulation of puppetry performance as a teaching tool. In the digital age, particular attention to effective storytelling in technical collaboration to enhance its narrative competencies. It examines how digital tools, through the film medium can be integrated into puppetry education. This study is anchored on Constructivist Learning Theory and Multimodal Theory using *The Untold Story* written and directed by Aniebiet Mbede for Akwa Ibom State University (AKSU) Pinnacle Theatre (Twelfth Season of Productions, 2026). In a qualitative case study design, data was collected through experimentation, participant's observation and key informant's interview. Findings reveal that whereas, traditional methods of puppetry manipulation enhance the imagination; the innovative narrative structure of the digital age extends the frontiers of the performance in an interactive and transmissible media that embodies intentional storytelling in a format adept to contemporary society. The study demonstrates that well-designed puppets, combined with effective manipulation techniques, contribute to audience engagement, character development, visual aesthetics, and the communication of dramatic themes. The findings further reveal that puppetry encourages audience participation, particularly among children and young adults. The research recommends partnerships between professional puppeteers and the film/creative industry to establish collaborative pedagogical productions.

Keywords: *Puppetry Pedagogy, Contemporary Theatre, Digital Technology, Storytelling, Theatre-in-Education.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Puppetry, as one of the oldest and most powerful vehicles for communication, cultural expression and communal storytelling, occupies a strategic place in traditional theatre practice. Across civilizations and centuries, performing arts practitioners have continually explored the possibilities of the stage, experimenting with form, character, spectacle and narrative of a variety of theatrical forms to express its core message in the most didactic manner. Puppetry as a main vein in the theatrical construct involves the manipulation of puppets, inanimate figures or objects (by performers known as puppeteers) with the purpose of creating dramatic narrative or expression for an audience. Brockett and Hildy (2003) states that, "among the many theatrical traditions that have enriched this global heritage, puppetry stands out as a uniquely versatile and enduring art form" (p. 6). From the rudimentary articulated wooden figures unearthed in ancient Egypt dating back to around 2000 BCE, to the sophisticated Bunraku puppet theatre of Japan and the politically charged productions of contemporary companies worldwide, puppetry has demonstrated a remarkable capacity to communicate complex human truths through the animated inanimate.

However, puppetry and its pedagogical advantages are largely manipulated manually without a coherent framework to integrate digital tools (motion capture, projection mapping and virtual performance platforms), which can make for increased audience participation by expanding the vocabulary of the form to reach new audiences. According to Mbede et al. (2024), "The integration of multimedia to stage productions enhances the aesthetic and communicative value of theatrical presentations, therefore capable of satisfying new audiences for wider reception in the Nigerian theatre milieu" (p. 134). This satisfying experience is the fresh dimension of pedagogic engagement the

integration of puppetry to film media offers to contemporary theatre practice. Mbede et al. (2024) submits that, “with the fusion of the stage actions with the animation, audio inserts, video projections, and live actors, the performance came out not only as an aesthetically-appealing production but had its message well communicated to the audience” (p. 149).

Puppetry occupies a recognised and growing role in Nigerian performing arts, both as a form of indigenous performance heritage and as a contemporary theatrical technique. The pedagogical and artistic value of puppetry, particularly its capacity to animate complex narratives, represent abstract ideas, and engage diverse audiences, has been affirmed by performance scholars and practitioners alike. However, within Nigerian university theatre departments, as there is a conspicuous absence of structured, research-based documentation of how puppet construction and manipulation practices are developed, applied, and evaluated in the context of actual artistic productions.

The significance of puppetry within the African context and Nigeria in particular cannot be understated. African puppet traditions predate Western theatrical contact, with indigenous puppet and masquerade traditions serving ceremonial, social, and narrative functions in communities across the continent. Among the Tiv people of Nigeria’s Benue and Niger States, for instance, the Kwagh-hir puppet theatre is a composite performance art that integrates puppetry, music, and communal storytelling in open-air circular spaces. Ayo Akinwale avers that, “these traditions demonstrate that the manipulation of animated figures for the purposes of storytelling and community engagement is not an imported phenomenon but an organic feature of Nigerian performance heritage” (p. 213). The Yoruba Gelede masquerade of southwest Nigeria similarly incorporates articulated puppet-like figures as part of masquerade performance, honouring the spiritual and social roles of women and the divine feminine.

Within the contemporary Nigerian university theatre landscape, puppetry has gained increasing attention as both a subject of study and a medium of performance practice. Studies such as those published in *Journal of Critical Stages* have examined the directorial dimensions of puppetry production at the University of Port Harcourt, affirming that the strategic use of puppet and human actors within a single production can significantly deepen the communicative reach of theatrical works. Idogho (2017) defines “a puppet as an inanimate object or figure animated by a puppeteer, either manually or mechanically” (p. 2). A definition that underscores the centrality of manipulation skill to the entire enterprise of puppetry.

According to Mbede (2026), “In the twenty-first century, human interactions have been reshaped by the rise of digital technology. The way people work, talk, love, buy, sell and live life have been remarkably transformed by digital technology. This transformation occurs chiefly through smartphones, social media, and virtual communication platforms. Globally, the template available for the marketing and promotion of films has become more accessible, hence the rise in independent film promotion as an integrated approach to create increased visibility and market growth for the film business” (p. 177). It is within this broader context that the experimentation in *The Untold Story*, a film written and directed by Aniebiet Mbede in the Akwa Ibom State University (AKSU), Pinnacle Theatre, assumes particular importance as a site of inquiry for this study.

Despite the obvious potential of puppetry as a tool for effective theatrical communication, systematic scholarly attention to how puppet construction and manipulation techniques are practiced and taught within Nigerian university theatre settings specifically remains sparse as most scholarly literature on Nigerian theatre focuses on conventional dramatic forms, while practical investigations into the construction methods, manipulation disciplines, and narrative effectiveness of puppetry in this context are largely absent. This research, therefore, undertakes to bridge that gap, examining the ways in which the construction and manipulation of puppets contribute to effective storytelling in the contemporary theatre practice.

A puppet poorly constructed for its intended performance purpose will limit the manipulator’s expressive range; conversely, a technically well-made puppet operated by an undertrained puppeteer will fail to achieve its communicative potential. Understanding this interdependence is critical for performance education. This study therefore addresses the problem of insufficient scholarly documentation and analysis of puppet construction, manipulation technique, and storytelling effectiveness in the AKSU Pinnacle Theatre.

According to Wilson & Goldfarb (2012), the figures may take various forms: hand puppets, where the puppeteer’s hand fits inside the puppet’s body to animate its movements; marionettes, which are suspended and controlled by an arrangement of strings attached to a control bar held from above; rod puppets, which are constructed around a central rod with the head affixed at the top and arms controlled by separate rods; shadow puppets, which are cut-out figures held between a light source and a screen to project silhouetted images; and body puppets, where the performer’s own body is enclosed within the puppet structure (p. 152). Each type carries its own performance vocabulary and demands specific construction techniques and manipulation skills.

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2. REVIEW OF RELATED LITERATURE

Concept of Puppetry

Puppetry is one of the oldest theatrical art forms known to humanity. Scholars across the disciplines of theatre studies, anthropology, performance theory, and cultural studies have offered varied but complementary definitions. The Encyclopedia of Puppetry Arts (UNIMA) defines puppetry broadly as the "theatrical art form that involves the manipulation of artificial figures typically constructed to represent human, animal, or fantastical characters by performers known as puppeteers" (p. 2). *EBSCO Research Starters* confirm that puppetry's historical roots trace back to ancient civilisations, with evidence of its practice found in Egypt, China, and Greece. Rudimentary wooden figures with articulated joints and string-and-pulley systems were created as early as 2000 BCE, while shadow puppetry was developed contemporaneously in China. These origins underscore the deep and enduring human impulse to animate the inanimate for the purposes of narrative communication.

Types of Puppets and Their Construction

The literature identifies several major categories of puppets, each characterised by distinct construction approaches and manipulation techniques. Britannica's encyclopedic survey identifies the following principal types: hand (or glove) puppets, marionettes, rod puppets, shadow puppets, and body puppets. The *Chicago International Puppet Theatre Festival's Glossary of Puppetry* extends this classification to include Bunraku, noting that many contemporary puppets fall into more than one category or combine elements across types.

Hand puppets consist of a hollow cloth body that fits over the manipulator's hand, with the fingers operating the head and arms of the figure. According to Britannica, "this type of puppet is visible from the waist upward and is typically associated with a narrow performance booth. The performer holds their hands above their head and stands behind the booth opening" (p. 245). Hand puppets are among the most portable and accessible puppet forms, capable of being operated by a single performer, and they are associated with the great European folk puppet heroes including the English Punch and Judy tradition. Their construction requires careful attention to the proportions of the cloth body, the weight of the head (traditionally carved from wood, though contemporary practice uses foam, papier-mâché, and other materials), and the fitting of the garment around the puppeteer's hand.

Marionettes, by contrast, are suspended and controlled by a number of strings attached to a control bar held from above by the puppeteer. Wikipedia notes that marionettes may also have a central control rod attached to the bar. The complexity of marionette construction relates directly to its manipulation demands: each jointed limb must be separately strung and balanced so that the puppet moves convincingly in response to the puppeteer's gestures. For theatre, long-string marionettes concealed from the audience are worked from overhead scaffolding, while short-string marionettes are used when the puppeteers are visible. The *Marionette Journal on Robotic Manipulation* notes that, "control rods attached to the arms allow for strong and expressive movement, but as puppets adopt more dexterous design the rod control becomes increasingly demanding" (p. 53).

Rod puppets are constructed from a head attached to a central rod, with a body form over the rod and arms controlled by separate rods. According to Wikipedia, rod puppets are made from this central rod

structure, and their manipulation allows for significant physical expressivity. Britannica notes that in university and college theatres in the United States, following the influence of Marjorie Batchelder, the hand-rod puppet was particularly valued a form in which the hand passes inside the puppet's body to grasp a short rod to the head while the arms are manipulated by rods. One advantage of this technique is that it permits the bending of the puppet's body, with the manipulator's wrist corresponding to the puppet's waist. Kaliana describes rod puppets as suitable for operation at tabletop height or as free-floating figures if puppeteers are hidden overhead.

Shadow puppets are cut-out figures, typically made from paper or animal hide, held between a light source and a translucent screen so that silhouetted images are projected for the audience. The UNIMA World Encyclopedia of Puppetry (2019) notes that, "shadow puppetry was developed in China during the same period as the earliest articulated wooden figures in Egypt. In some traditions, as in Indonesian *Motekar Wayang*, the shadow puppets can project in full colour rather than as simple black silhouettes" (p. 151). Bunraku puppets, a classical form originating in seventeenth-century Osaka, Japan stand approximately one metre high and are operated by three puppeteers: the master puppeteer controls the head and facial expressions with the left hand and the puppet's right arm with the right; the first assistant controls the left arm; and the second assistant operates the legs and feet. This three-person operation places extraordinary demands on coordination and ensemble communication among the manipulators.

In the African context, puppet construction draws on indigenous traditions and materials that reflect specific cultural values and ceremonial functions. Hagher (2013) notes that, "the Kwagh-hir puppet theatre of the Tiv people of central Nigeria employs both rod and string puppets as well as masquerade puppets which have one or more persons inside the puppet operating its movable parts" (p. 154). These puppets can be made to perform intricate movements including figures of soldiers, doctors, and animals and are constructed with geometric aesthetic forms: triangular noses, Nok-like eyes, small lips, and vibrant, pungent colour schemes. The Gelede masquerades of the Yoruba people incorporate carved wooden headpieces in which puppets and masks are merged, with puppets (ero) fixed onto helmet masks of which they become integral parts. The Bamana marotte type of body puppet, as described in the *Social Dynamics in African Puppetry*, uses a framework mounted on the head of a costumed performer, with arms separately carved and attached by string, their movement controlled by concealed rods.

African Puppetry: Construction, Manipulation, and Social Function

According to Kruger (2010), in *Social Dynamics in African Puppetry* as cited in *Contemporary Theatre Review Journal*, offers an important regional comparative study. The article argues that, "the use of puppets in sub-Saharan African countries is often related to the transmission and persistence of social structures" (p. 137). Public rituals and masquerades such as the Gelede of the Yoruba and the performances of the Kamalen ton of the Bamana serve both normative and adaptive social functions, reinforcing stability while remaining capable of modifying cultural practice through performance. The article's analysis of Gelede construction is particularly detailed: the Gelede mask consists of carved wooden headpieces in which puppets and masks are merged, with dances, songs and drumming combined into spectacular performances. The articulated puppet figures (ero) are fixed onto helmet masks, are part of their integral construction, and perform only by day when they are more visible. The Bamana marotte body puppet, meanwhile, is mounted on a framework carried on the head of a costumed performer, with separately carved arms attached by string and moved by concealed rods.

The UNIMA World Encyclopedia's entry on Nigeria confirms the breadth and diversity of puppet traditions across the country. Puppet theatre exists in various forms in Nigeria, with figures made by experienced sculptors and artists normally used in theatrical performances confined to the relevant ethnic group. The Kanuri puppet tradition has endured historical pressures, including Islamic prohibitions of the Hausa puppet tradition and the dabo-dabo puppeteers continue to practise. Gelede was recognised by UNESCO as a Masterpiece of the Oral and Intangible Cultural Heritage of Humanity in 2001, affirming the international cultural significance of Nigerian puppet performance. The UNIMA Africa entry further notes that across the continent today, puppet companies speak to wider publics and put the accent on secular content, moving beyond purely ritual contexts into educational shows and development communication, a trajectory directly relevant to university theatre practice.

The 2025 PIR Journal report on the UNIMA puppetry symposium in Africa documents the continued vitality of the continent's puppet traditions and scholarship. Master puppeteer Yaya Coulibaly of Mali, a seventh-generation practitioner, presented his manipulation techniques and the stories behind his 25,000 puppets, demonstrating that deep expertise in puppet construction and manipulation is the

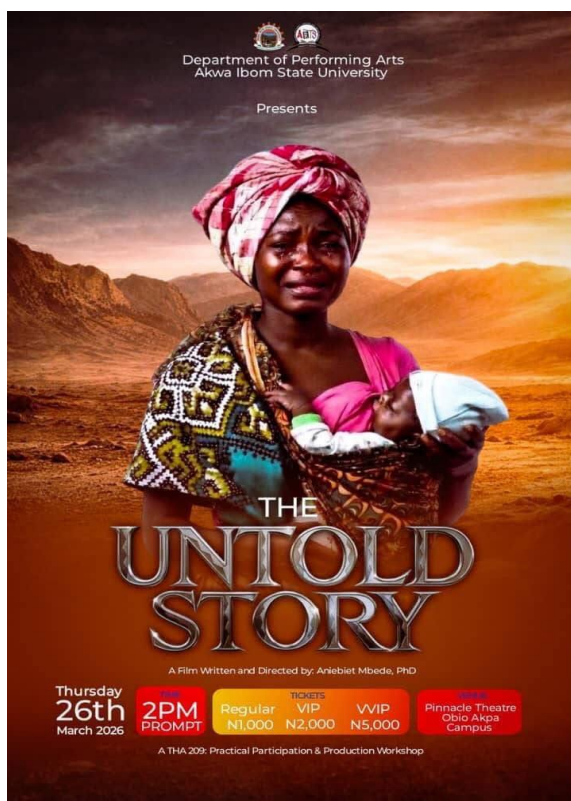
product of sustained intergenerational learning. The symposium also heard from post-graduate practice-as-research scholars, confirming that practical puppetry training and academic research are increasingly understood as inseparable within the African university context.

Puppetry in Nigerian Theatre

The seminal study on puppetry in Nigerian by Tekena Gasper Mark, published in *Critical Stages* under the title, *Directing and Puppetry in Contemporary Nigerian Theatre: A Study of the Production Final Draft* examines the directorial indices of a puppetry performance at the University of Port Harcourt Arts Theatre, directed by Ekeh Nneka Grace on 24 September 2018. Mark observes that, “the deployment of the codes of directing in the production vivified the message of the play, and that the combined use of human and puppet actors pushed the boundaries of the story for the benefit of the audience” (p. 141). The study makes the important recommendation that directors in Nigerian theatre should take advantage of the art of puppetry in their theatrical experimentations. According to Mbede (2026), “Beyond its fun overcoat, new media channels are becoming increasingly useful in changing the narrative of societal concerns paraded in online domains, which bother on social issues. The use of social media platforms for example, has enhanced the integration of the masses’ incoherent noises into formidable voices that speak and spit volcanic change” (Pp. 3 - 4).

Mark’s study also provides useful empirical documentation of the diversity of puppet forms used in Nigerian cultural performance. The dogo-dogo puppetry of the Kanuri people in Borno State, documented by Ellison and cited by Mark, exemplifies the hand-puppet tradition in indigenous Nigerian practice: rag dolls slipped onto the hand like a glove, manipulated in a tent formed by the puppeteer’s body. The Kwagh-hir puppet theatre of the Tiv people is a composite art form integrating storytelling, poetry, music, dance, and dramatisation, employing rod, string, and masquerade puppets that can perform intricate movements. These indigenous examples confirm that the practice of constructing and manipulating puppets for storytelling purposes has deep roots in Nigerian cultural life, and that contemporary university theatre practice builds on and continues this heritage.

Idogho’s article in *The Crab: Journal of Theatre and Media Arts*, *Puppet Theatre in Child Education and Development: A Theoretical Overview* provided foundational conceptual grounding for the role of puppetry in Nigerian educational and theatrical contexts. Idogho (2017) argues that, “the use of puppets for achieving curricular goals surpasses traditional approaches in the educational process of child development, and has become more conventionally accepted yet this development has not been given the due attention it deserves in practice in Nigeria” (p.123). This study’s qualitative approach, drawing on extant literature to foreground puppets as didactic means for achieving curricular goals, places the present research within a broader conversation about the under-theorised and under-resourced status of puppetry in Nigerian academic and theatrical institutions.



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Source: *The Untold Story*, 2026 AKSU Season of Performances

Puppet Construction in *The Untold Story*

Puppetry occupies a distinctive position within theatrical performance because it externalises the sign-making process that live acting ordinarily conceals within the actor's body. Where the human performer's body is simultaneously the source and the vehicle of theatrical meaning, the puppet separates these functions: a constructed object becomes the visible sign, while the animating performer recedes, wholly or partially, from the audience's field of attention.

Within educational theatre environments such as the Pinnacle Theatre of Akwa Ibom State University (AKSU), puppet construction functions both as an artistic practice and as a pedagogical exercise through which students acquire practical skills in design, craftsmanship, teamwork, and creative problem-solving. Although there is limited published documentation focusing specifically on puppet construction activities at Pinnacle Theatre, the department's curriculum, production orientation, and emphasis on theatre technology provide a strong basis for understanding its practices within Nigerian university theatre education.

Using the production of *The Untold Story*, the director makes use of the puppets in the school award's scene, where there was drama, dance, and songs with miming. To make the scene more interesting, the puppets are used to entertain the audience members during award ceremony. The puppets came in different colours, red, blue, and yellow. During an interview with Dr. Aniebiet Mbede, the playwright/Director of *The Untold Story*, she said that, the main idea of puppetry in theatre productions is to enrich the storytelling process by introducing a creative visual medium that would capture the audience's attention while simplifying the presentation of complex emotions and social issues.

Puppet construction in Nigerian educational and community theatre contexts typically draws on locally available and often recycled materials: carved softwood or balsa for heads and hands, raffia, jute or dyed fabric for costuming, calabash or papier-mâché for lightweight heads, and wire or cane for internal armatures enabling articulation. The idea behind the puppet named "red giggles" was because of the colour and it was bright and energetic. The puppet too was used to pass a message which aligns with the Experimental Learning Theory. Using the colours, the students and actors were able to learn the emotional awareness, social skills (which were sharing, empathy, cooperation) attached to the puppet" (p. 1). Aniebiet Mbede in an interview shared that, puppetry introduced visual variety and symbolic depth, making the narrative more engaging. It helped communicate emotions and ideas that might have been difficult through dialogue alone, thereby increasing the audience's emotional connection with the story. Material choice is rarely neutral. A puppet created from indigenous materials carries an indexical trace of the environment and craft economy from which it emerged, while a puppet built substantially from imported synthetic materials may symbolically align a production with modernity, urban contemporaneity, or institutional resourcing. Recognising this allows construction inventories, what materials were used, sourced from where, worked by whom, to be read not merely as budgetary or logistical records but as data bearing directly on the semiotic identity of a production.

During an interview with Chisom Blessing, she said that, "the process of puppet making at AKSU Pinnacle Theatre, puppet construction usually begins with selecting affordable and locally available materials such as foam, papier-mâché, fabric, cardboard for the framing, and wire. The choice of material depends on the type of puppet required and the demands of the production" (p. 1). During construction, emphasis is placed on creating expressive facial features, movable joints, and costumes that clearly communicate the puppet's identity. These techniques are preferred because they are cost-effective, sustainable, and allow students to develop practical skills while producing visually engaging puppets. Within Nigerian educational theatre generally, and within festival and pedagogical contexts associated with AKSU productions specifically, puppet construction also serves an institutional and pedagogical experimental function beyond the individual production. A puppet built collaboratively by students under supervision indexes, for an audience aware of its provenance, a training process and departmental identity, not merely the fictional character it depicts. This layered signification, character, craft, and institution simultaneously is consistent with Fischer-Lichte's broader claim that theatrical signs are signs of signs: a student-built puppet signifies both the played role and the pedagogical apparatus that produced it.

Techniques of Puppet Manipulation for Storytelling in *The Untold Story*

According to Tillis (1992), influential formulation is an object that, "an audience is willing to perceive as possessing life, even while remaining fully aware that it does not" (p. 22). This double awareness, perceiving the puppet as both inert matter and living character at once is what Tillis (1992),

terms the puppet's doubly ontological nature, a condition quite different from the audience's relationship to a live actor, whose aliveness requires no imaginative concession (p. 47). Manipulation, in this context, refers to the specific physical vocabulary by which a puppeteer transfers intention, breath, rhythm, and weight into the object: the choices of grip, leverage, timing, and bodily concealment or exposure that make an assemblage of wood, cloth, or card appear to want something. Manipulation technique is therefore not incidental to puppetry's meaning; it is a multimodal channel through which narrative is generated, since a puppet has no face capable of involuntary micro-expression and no voice unless the manipulator or a separate performer supplies one. Every signal of intention or emotion must be manufactured deliberately through the manipulator's technique, which places an unusually heavy interpretive burden on the audience's imagination. Another interview with another student, Ubong Okon, he said that, Effective puppet manipulation is essential because it gives life and personality to an otherwise lifeless object. Through coordinated movements, facial orientation, gestures, timing, and synchronisation with voice, the audience begins to perceive the puppet as a living character. At AKSU Pinnacle Theatre, performers undergo rehearsals that focus on body coordination, voice projection, and emotional expression to ensure that puppet movements correspond with the dialogue and dramatic action.

During the film production of *The Untold Story*, the award presentation scene, the puppets come on stage to manipulate the mood of the scene, bringing joy to the actors who laugh at the actions and presentations of the puppets. Ubong Okon further explains that "when manipulation is done effectively, it strengthens characterisation, enhances audience engagement, and improves the overall storytelling experience by making the narrative more believable and emotionally appealing" (p.1). The technique adopted by AKSU pinnacle is body puppetry and it involves two or three visible manipulators is the technique best suited to large-scale festival set pieces, since it allows a single large figure a masquerade-scaled animal or ancestral figure, for instance to command the full width of the Pinnacle Theatre stage and to be legible even to audience members seated at the rear of an outdoor or semi-open festival crowd.

What puppet performance offers instead is a controlled, sustained negotiation between two simultaneous readings of the same stage picture: the object as object, and the object as character. The manipulation technique is the instrument by which the performer tips that negotiation in favour of character, moment by moment, without ever fully erasing the object's material reality. When there is proper training for puppeteers, integrating puppetry into rehearsals from the beginning and careful selection of puppet designs that align with the production's artistic vision and thematic objectives will be achieved. This explains that the puppets used for the film production were manipulated to match the director's artistic vision and present the production in a vibrant model. The audience's imaginative labour is not passive absorption but active, moment-to-moment collaboration with the manipulator, a dynamic that arguably intensifies the attentional and imagistic dimensions of transportation precisely because it demands continuous perceptual work rather than effortless immersion.

Pedagogic Effectiveness: Puppetry as a Storytelling Device

Puppetry occupies a curious and powerful position among the world's storytelling technologies. It is at once one of the oldest performance forms predating written drama in many cultures and one of the most conceptually sophisticated, because it asks an audience to invest emotional and cognitive belief in an object that everyone present knows is inanimate. This paradox is precisely what gives puppetry its unusual force as a narrative medium. Where live actors rely on the illusion that 'this person is that character'. Puppetry relies on a double consciousness: the audience simultaneously perceives the puppet as an object and as a living being, and it is in the gap between those two perceptions that meaning, metaphor, and emotional resonance are generated.

In more recent decades, puppetry has been deliberately incorporated into Nigerian applied and educational theatre practice, particularly in Theatre-in-Education (TIE) work, precisely because of the mechanisms outlined above: its capacity to communicate across the multilingual and multi-ethnic composition of many Nigerian classrooms, its usefulness in approaching sensitive social topics such as health, hygiene, child protection, and civic values with young audiences without the defensiveness that direct adult instruction can provoke, and its low material cost relative to full-scale dramatic production, making it a practical tool in resource-constrained educational settings.

Puppetry's impact on storytelling effectiveness in *The Untold Story* is not incidental or merely decorative; it is structural. The puppet's fundamental nature as a doubly perceived object, simultaneously inert thing and animated being, generates a distinctive aesthetic distance that makes it unusually well suited to symbolic compression, emotionally safe engagement with difficult material, sustained audience attention in the school talent and award scene which featured school children (ages 10-16), cross-linguistic transmissibility and durable narrative recall. The effect of puppet manipulation included: creative expressions in song, an exhilarating atmosphere of learning about culture in songs, games and storytelling.



Plates 3 and 4: Puppets on Display, Pinnacle Theatre Pedagogic Experiment

Source: *The Untold Story*, 2026 AKSU Season of Performances

At the same time, puppetry's effectiveness is contingent on performer skill, resourcing, cultural legibility, and honest engagement with, the material being staged. A rigorous account of puppetry's storytelling power must therefore hold both halves together: the theoretical account of why the form works, and a clear-eyed sense of the conditions under which it can fail to. In *The Untold Story*, a group of four (4) puppets performed to music *Afo ke Edi* by Mista Xto. This is a chant of love, beauty and grace which expressed the ideas and had the students responding to the rhythm and beat. The teamwork, confidence, emotional and cultural awareness of audience members as pedagogic ingredients, using these elements to tell a story.

Challenges Encountered in Puppet Construction and Performance in *The Untold Story*

One of the challenges of puppet construction is choosing appropriate materials, which involves balancing weight, flexibility, cost, and longevity. Lightweight materials (foam, papier-mâché, fabric) ease manipulation but wear quickly under repeated use; sturdier materials (wood, metal, resin) last longer but add weight and reduce mobility. Climate and storage conditions particularly humidity and heat in tropical settings, can warp joints, degrade adhesives, and shorten a puppet's usable lifespan, a recurring concern for touring or repertory productions. Also, designing a puppet's internal mechanism (rods, strings, hinges, levers) to permit believable movement is a significant engineering challenge. Overly rigid joints produce mechanical, unconvincing motion; overly loose joints compromise control and precision. Balancing the range of motion needed for expressive gesture against the structural integrity required for repeated use demands careful iterative prototyping. Mbede (2026) avers that, "Film aesthetics and the stylistic elements of cinematic storytelling, as demonstrated by a director's ability to employ technical and artistic techniques and technicalities for a meaningful cinematic experience" (p. 1). In the production of *The Untold Story*, the challenges faced was the limited resources of constructing quality puppets, insufficient time for rehearsals, the need to train performers in puppet manipulation and coordinating puppet movements with actors, lighting, and sound. Puppets must be sized appropriately for their performance context. A puppet built for intimate table-top work may become invisible in a large proscenium house, while a puppet scaled for a large venue may become unwieldy or grotesque in close quarters. Getting proportion right especially when a puppet must share stage space with human actors, is a persistent design problem, since anatomically "correct" scaling often reads as lifeless, while stylized exaggeration can better convey character but risks distortion.

Puppet-building is materially and labour-intensive. Educational and community theatre companies, a context frequently seen in Nigerian and other African performance traditions often face constrained budgets, leading to compromises in material quality, mechanism sophistication, or the number of puppets a production can field. This economic pressure often forces companies to improvise with local or recycled materials, which introduces its own durability and consistency challenges. Puppets frequently carry symbolic, ritual, or cultural weight, particularly in traditions where masking and figure performance intersect with spiritual practice. Constructing a puppet that is both performatively functional and culturally faithful (in colour, form, adornment, and material) requires the builder to reconcile

practical stagecraft demands with community expectations and, at times, restrictions around who may build or handle certain figures, especially when integrated into the film medium. Mbede (2026) submits that, “Film has long served as a potent medium for socio-cultural change, acting as both a reflection of society and a tool to influence and shape cultural norms and values” (p. 396). The careful selection of materials, colours, costumes, and structural designs contributes significantly to character representation and the visual effectiveness of the performance. The useful expression of puppetry in children’s theatre, educational drama, cultural performances, and social advocacy productions cannot be replaced but only enhanced. Their symbolic and visual qualities enable audiences to understand complex concepts, appreciate cultural values, and retain dramatic messages more effectively than through conventional performance methods alone.

The challenges of puppet construction and performance are deeply interdependent: a structural compromise made at the building stage inevitably surfaces as a performative limitation, and performative demands (visibility, expressiveness, durability under repeated use) should ideally inform construction choices from the outset. Addressing these challenges effectively requires sustained collaboration between builders, performers, and directors, adequate training and rehearsal time, and, particularly in resource-constrained educational or community theatre settings creative problem-solving that balances artistic ambition against material and financial reality.

3. METHODOLOGY

This study adopts a qualitative case study research design, anchored on Constructivist Learning Theory and Multimodal Theory, to investigate puppetry pedagogy as a strategy for effective storytelling in contemporary theatre, using *The Untold Story* (AKSU Pinnacle Theatre, Twelfth Season of Productions, 2026) as its purposive case. The population of interest comprised students, performers, and production personnel directly involved in the construction and manipulation of puppets for the production, from whom key informants were purposively selected on the basis of their direct participation in puppet design, building, and manipulation.

Three data-gathering instruments were triangulated: participant observation (through which the researcher documented rehearsals) construction sessions, and the live performance of the puppetry sequences, particularly the school award scene; experimentation, involving hands-on engagement with material selection, puppet construction techniques, and manipulation exercises to assess their pedagogical and narrative effects; and key informant interviews, conducted with the director and student puppeteers and builders (including Rebecca Ekerette, Chisom Blessing, and Ubong Okon), using a semi-structured interview guide to elicit reflections on construction processes, manipulation technique, and perceived storytelling impact.

Data generated from field notes, interview transcripts, and production observation were subjected to thematic content analysis, with recurring patterns coded around three broad categories consistent with the study’s objectives: puppet construction practice, manipulation technique, also the pedagogic and storytelling effectiveness, allowing the researcher to interpret findings against the constructivist premise that learners build knowledge through hands-on experience, and the multimodal premise that meaning is communicated through the interaction of visual, gestural, aural, and material sign systems.

4. DISCUSSION OF FINDINGS

Findings from the study affirm that puppet construction at AKSU Pinnacle Theatre functions simultaneously as artistic craft and experiential pedagogy. Consistent with Constructivist Learning Theory, students engaged in hands-on selection of affordable, locally sourced materials (foam, papier-mâché, fabric, cardboard, wire), and this material engagement itself became a site of learning, of proportion, durability, and expressive design, rather than a merely technical precursor to performance. The finding that puppets such as ‘Red Giggles’ were deliberately colour-coded to carry emotional meaning supports the study’s Multimodal Theory framework: colour, form, and material functioned as independent communicative channels working alongside dialogue, music, and movement to carry narrative meaning.

On manipulation, the data show that effective puppetry is not incidental to storytelling but structural to it. Because puppets lack involuntary facial expression, informants consistently emphasised that meaning had to be manufactured deliberately through coordinated gesture, timing, and voice synchronisation, a finding that validates Tillis’s concept of the puppet’s ‘doubly ontological’ nature and demonstrates that manipulation skill directly determines narrative legibility. The body-puppetry technique adopted for the production, requiring two to three visible manipulators, was found particularly effective for large-scale, festival-style staging, allowing figures to remain legible across the full width of the Pinnacle Theatre stage.

Regarding pedagogic effectiveness, findings reveal that the puppetry sequence in the school award scene sustained unusually high engagement among young audience members (ages 10-16), fostering active participation, emotional connection, and cultural transmission through music, dance, and call-and-response with the puppets. This supports the literature's claim that puppetry's 'double consciousness', audiences knowingly investing belief in an object they recognise as inanimate, creates a distinctive aesthetic distance well suited to communicating complex or sensitive themes to young audiences without didactic heavy-handedness.

Finally, the findings also surface the interdependence of construction and performance challenges: material constraints (cost, weight, climate-related wear) directly limited manipulative range, while insufficient rehearsal time constrained the depth of skill development. These findings collectively suggest that puppetry pedagogy's storytelling effectiveness in the Nigerian university theatre context is contingent not merely on the presence of puppets, but on sustained investment in training, materials, and rehearsal time to fully exploit the form's demonstrated pedagogical, aesthetic and narrative potential.

5. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Conclusion

In conclusion, this study establishes puppetry pedagogy as an effective storytelling tool capable of presenting imaginative narratives, cultural traditions, educational themes, and social issues in an engaging and accessible manner. The construction, manipulation and incorporation of puppets to the film *The Untold Story* by way of dances, music, stylized movements of the puppets reflect creativity, innovation, and resourcefulness. This enabled learners (within the film construct and beyond) to learn traditional songs, dances and rhymes. To this end, theatre practitioners should work at promoting indigenous craftsmanship and encourage sustainable digital theatre production culture through the effective use of new media channels for puppetry expressions.

The study affirms that puppet construction and manipulation are indispensable components of effective storytelling and the successful integration enriches theatrical performances by bringing inanimate objects to life, strengthening narrative communication, preserving cultural heritage, and enhancing audience engagement. The continued development of puppetry through improved training, institutional support, investment in production resources, and the incorporation of contemporary technologies will further enhance the quality of storytelling and reinforce the role of contemporary theatre as a centre for creative innovation, practical theatre education, and cultural expression. Ultimately, puppetry should be regarded not merely as a performance technique but as a dynamic theatrical art form that continues to expand the possibilities of storytelling within contemporary theatre milieu.

Recommendations

Based on the findings and conclusions of this study, the following recommendations are proposed to enhance puppet construction and manipulation for effective storytelling contemporary theatre:

Strengthen Practical Training in Puppetry: Educational theatres should provide more intensive practical training in puppet construction and manipulation through workshops, studio sessions, and regular rehearsals. This will enable students to acquire advanced technical skills in puppet design, movement, voice synchronisation, and performance techniques necessary for effective storytelling.

Review and Enrich the Theatre Curriculum: The Department of Theatre Arts should incorporate more specialised courses and practical modules on puppetry into its curriculum. Areas such as puppet design, puppet engineering, manipulation techniques, maintenance, and puppet theatre production should receive greater academic attention to equip students with comprehensive professional skills.

Establish a Dedicated Puppetry Workshop: Contemporary Theatre practitioners should establish a well-equipped puppetry workshop and production studio integrated with digital technology, where students can design, construct, repair and safely store puppets. Such a facility would encourage continuous practical learning, experimentation, and innovation in puppet performance.

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