
Creating the Perfect Puppetry Table

~ Rachel Ladasky Nielsen



A few years ago, after finishing puppetry training with Suzanne Down, I came home brimming with excitement and new ideas for how I would do puppetry, both with the children in my nursery classroom and in my newly forming personal business endeavor. What I needed most was a good puppetry table.

While I am able to make many of my ideas come to life out of wool roving, I am less able to create things out of wood! So, as I have done all of my life when I had an idea and needed something built, I went to my carpenter father and asked him to build me a puppetry table. As always, he was happy to build what I needed; as always, he needed more information. This is where my creative know-how dropped off and his stepped in. I said it needed to be “about this big” (gesturing with my arms outstretched to my sides and sweeping them out in front of me), kidney-bean shaped, knee-high, and light enough to transport in my small, 4-door hatchback.

My dad smiled and we went to his garage where he sat me down on a bucket and laid a piece of plywood out on some stools in front of me. He had me scoot

in close to the plywood and reach my arms out to my desired length, which he marked with a pencil. Then he made lines rounding out the corners and making a little indent at the center of the back where I would sit. Next, he measured the height of my knees while I was seated comfortably and said he would think about how to best make it easy to set up, take apart, and transport. I left him to it.

Within a week, he had finished. It was exactly what I wanted! I have been using it regularly at school, where it fits nicely in a closet without taking up much room. It is very easy to set up and take apart, and it fits easily in my car. It is the perfect size and height for table-puppetry and it’s great for small marionette shows as well. When Nancy Blanning saw it, she thought it was fantastic and asked if I would be willing to share the design. Here it is! Keep in mind that the height and width are intended to be completely customizable—you can adjust them to your needs. This table is unique and most useful in the design for the legs, which provide its ability to fold up and be easily transported.

Materials:

- One 4' x 8' sheet of 3/4" plywood
- One 8' length of 1" x 2" pine stock (or something similar)
- Two 12" piano hinges (or one longer hinge cut to size)
- Two 4" bolts with washers and wing nuts
- Wood screws, tools, etc.

1) **Cut the plywood in half** lengthwise, to make two 2' x 8' pieces.

2) **Make the tabletop.** First, determine the width of your table. Have a helper measure your armspan, fingertips to fingertips with your arms stretched fully open. Cut one of the 2' x 8' pieces of plywood to that length, then round off the corners, and make a small indent in the center where you will sit (see Fig. 1).



3) **Make the legs.** First, determine the height of the table. Sit on a stool you would use while doing a puppet show and have a helper measure the distance from the floor to the top of your knees. Add 1 inch to the result. Mark and cut two pieces of this height and 1 foot in width from the plywood remaining after cutting the tabletop.

4) **Connect the legs to give the table stability.** Cut a piece of plywood 3' x 1'; this will serve as a brace between the legs. From the bottom of each leg, measure 2 inches and mark it. Using these marks as a guide, attach the legs to either end of the brace using the piano hinges (see Fig. 2). The brace should be attached to the legs 2 inches from the bottom.

5) **An additional stabilizer for the brace.** Cut a 3' length of the 1" x 2" pine stock and attach it to the middle of the bottom of the leg brace, as shown in Fig 3 (the piece of pine stock is marked in red).

6) **Make the mounting cleats for the legs.** Place the tabletop face down on the floor or workbench and position the leg assembly against the bottom side of the table. Mark the placement of each leg. Cut four 12" lengths of the 1" x 2" pine stock; you will position the cleats as shown in Fig 4. Attach with screws.



7) **Bolt-holes to lock the legs in position when the table is set up** (you can see the placement of the bolt at the top center of the leg in Fig 2). With the legs in place, drill holes through the full width of each set of cleats and legs. Make permanent marks at the tops of the legs (such as “R” and “L”) to remind you which leg goes in which cleat. Note that it will take several times placing and removing the bolts before the holes smooth out.

8) **Finishing touches.** My dad routed and sanded the edges of my table and sanded the top as well. This isn't necessary, but it does keep silks from snagging. I have left my table unfinished, but you could seal or paint yours to your liking.

When the table isn't in use, the legs fold flat and the legs and top are easily stored in a closet. Enjoy plenty of puppetry time with your handy new table! ♦

Rachel Ladasky Nielsen is the lead nursery teacher at *The Denver Waldorf School*. In addition to her classroom work, she has combined her passion for puppetry, storytelling, and needle-felting into her own business, *Star Meadow Story Arts*. Rachel has a M.Ed. in Waldorf Early Childhood Education from Antioch University New England.

