

THE MARIONETTE SHOW: *LES MISÉRABLES*

For several years I tried to find a good project for French 3-4 students, the kind of project that excites all my students and is still relevant. Of course, I tried all the usual projects—the imaginary trip to France, posters, models, plays etc. The idea of the marionette show seemed like something the class could do, and I was ready to try anything new and different.

In the fall of 2001 the class had just finished reading *Cyrano de Bergerac* in the *Rouge* textbook and tried the *Cyrano* play in the *Activités*. *Cyrano* was the students' choice for the marionette show. My class of seven students chose a character, recorded a script, then set off to the home economics room to make our marionettes. The marionettes consisted of styrofoam balls for the head, torso, hips, hands, and feet which were held together with thin nylon rope and suspended with fishing line to plastic pipe. Clay was stretched over the head so that features could be formed. Shaky eyes, yarn hair, and makeup created a nice look. By far, the hardest part was sewing up costumes with remnants of fabric with students who had never even sewn on a button! I grew up sewing doll clothes and then my own clothes, so thankfully I could handle any problem. We borrowed the puppet theater from the preschool class, making some adjustments for marionettes. With only one rehearsal, we sent out an open invitation to all classes at the high school. So many classes signed up that we had to perform the play four times. It was a success!

When school started the next fall the marionette show was the one thing I really looked forward to. I was lucky enough to get an AATF Small Grant for a proper marionette theater so any play seemed possible. The puppet theater we borrowed last year was too small, too short, and too narrow. We needed a stage wide enough for several marionettes and props to be seen and wide enough for several students to stand in the background and have room to work the marionettes. The Building Trades class agreed to make a theater for us which is exactly what our administration encourages—departments working together. The theater turned out perfectly! *Les Misérables* was chosen for the show. I had 12 students this year and needed more character parts.

We started the same way—editing a script to 20-30 minutes, recording it. Styrofoam balls, nylon rope, clay, yarn, shaky eyes, and fishing line were passed out along with a box in which to keep each “little person.” The students began forming their characters while singing the “marionette songs” from *Pinocchio* and the *Sound of Music*. Jean Valjean had to be a little bigger than the rest, and



Gavroche had to be more child size. As soon as the bodies were complete, we headed for the sewing machines in the home economics room. Each costume had to be designed and cut individually, unlike the ones from last year which all turned out looking like Musketeers except for Roxanne and the lady escort. Each lady in *Les Misérables* had to have a different style and fabric for her dress, and the male characters needed different shirts and hats as well as swords and guns. It took about four days to finish the clothes and accessories at a cost of under \$50. Improvements were made in the handling of the figures by using three paint stir sticks to hang the strings instead of plastic pipe. While we made the marionettes and prepared for the show, I talked about the French Revolution and the impact it had on the French people. The time spent making the clothes is not wasted time taken from learning French; it is time spent learning life skills and encouraging creativity in the design process. It is also time spent talking one on one in a relaxed work environment that is sometimes hard to do in normal classroom settings.

With the theater completed, marionettes finished, and script recorded, all we needed to do was send out invitations to other classes. So many classes signed up to see the show that we had to perform it six times. One student volunteered to make programs—something I had not thought about. Again, a success! We heard so many nice compliments, and even more exciting was having students and teachers ask what play we are going to do next year! For several days, the compliments kept coming our way! My favorite comment was: “I thought you would just do something simple like the ‘Three Bears.’ I can’t believe you did *Les Misérables*!” Well, after all, this is FRENCH 3!

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