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Power Puppets in Portable Pulpits: A Personal Account of Puppet Ministry in the African American Community

by Rev. Yolanda Sampson, M.Div.

Overview

Energetically dancing in front of my portable pulpit (puppet stage) to the soulful beats of PuppeTainment Productions' theme music *What Time Is It?*, my puppet shows commence with a fun and attention-grabbing call for audience participation: "What time is it?" "It's time for PuppeTainment!" PuppeTainment (pŭp pŭ tŕn' mŕnt) is a fresh blend of puppeteering and entertainment. It is a powerful, effective, and creative way to educate, empower, enlighten, and communicate with audiences of all ages. My colorful and loveable hand puppets are used to teach the timeless virtues of Jesus Christ in a hip, entertaining way while bringing the biblical principles to life for twenty-first-century children. The fusion of puppets, music, dancing, humor, spoken word, and storytelling is incorporated in the original scripts which pointedly address and offer solutions to today's most pressing ethical, moral, and spiritual problems afflicting many of our urban and suburban communities. Puppets have the power to communicate timeless life messages in a non-threatening way. Through God's grace, my power puppets in portable pulpits have presented shows as close to home as Constitution Hall and the National Zoo, and as far away as The Harriet Tubman House in London, England, as well as on television shows such as Fox Morning News.

The Origin of PuppeTainment

At the age of twelve, I was intrigued by Takoma Park Baptist Church's newly formed puppet ministry led by my former Youth Pastor, Rev. Ollis Mozon, especially since puppet ministry in the African American church was rare. This had to be the first time that I recall seeing culturally sensitive puppets (designed to look like me and

represent my culture). Original scripts were written to share the Gospel of Jesus Christ while portraying positive images of African Americans who have diverse characteristics and experiences. When ministering during Sunday School or Vacation Bible School, Rev. Mozon described me as a little shy girl who came alive when a puppet was placed on my hand. My love for puppet ministry grew even after Rev. Mozon left to serve as a United States Navy Chaplain. His indelible influence inspired me and my godsister Meg DeLoatch to write, produce, and perform puppet skits for some of Takoma Park's special worship services while we were high school students.



My puppets Lovuro and Kim performed with Staged Black Theatre in Arlington, Virginia. Photo courtesy Yolanda Sampson.

Neither I nor anyone I knew could have imagined that my passion for puppet ministry would eventually parlay into a business in 1992—the year in which Washington, DC would be branded “the murder capital of the world” with 451 homicides. This became particularly personal for me; one of the victims was a young woman that I knew named Dana who took several bullets intended for her drug dealer boyfriend as she was

riding in his car. My heart's cry was to share with the children that it is not safe for anyone to participate in drug activity and to hang around those who do.

I felt compelled to unleash my full creativity into this dark chasm of the drug culture. I believed that the puppets could communicate difficult messages to which the children would listen. If I say "Drugs are dangerous," maybe one or two children will listen to me. However, if you let the flavorful Lovuro or Papa D puppets exclaim "Drugs are poison!" with funky instrumental music in the background, the children are captivated. In the darkest time of our city, PuppeTainment came to offer compelling hope.

One Sunday, my good friend Eleanor Barnwell and her mother Otelia Barnwell accepted my invitation to come to church on a puppet ministry Sunday where I unveiled my self-esteem/anti-drug message. Thoroughly impressed by the show, Mrs. Barnwell, a school teacher, asked me whether I could come to Randle Highlands Elementary School in SE Washington, DC to perform a puppet show. The answer was an emphatic "Yes!" I was thrilled at the opportunity to deliver God's message of hope to a community plagued by drug use and escalating drug-related violence.

The children and teachers thoroughly enjoyed the puppet show, and Mrs. Barnwell placed an envelope with a check in my hand. Additionally, Mrs. Barnwell started referring me to other schools. With the help of my parents, Sam and Earline Sampson, in developing business cards and purchasing sound equipment, PuppeTainment was ready for prime time. Unbeknownst to my brothers Bo, Mike, and Gary at the time, newly created volunteer jobs of promoters, actors and stage crew had their names stamped on them. Lights, Camera, Action!

The Passion of PuppeTainment

From a distance, observers may have concluded that my puppet business was without challenges. But nothing could be further from the truth. In reality, at one point, I almost quit under the pressures. When I first started out, the hours were extremely long, and a lot of financial resources were needed. When I encountered people that I knew and shared my excitement about PuppeTainment Productions, I would hear negative comments like, "When is Yolanda going to get a real job? She's not doing anything with

her life but playing with her puppets.” I did know of other African American women who owned puppet businesses at the time, and the business was not growing as fast I desired. Discouraged, I tried to get a “real job” temporarily. Yet God provided for me every step of the way. It was not until Kwame Alexander—founder and then President of Staged Black Theatre in Arlington, Virginia—invited me to perform at The Harriet Tubman House Museum and the Africabana 93 Festival in London, England that I resolved in my heart that puppet ministry is something that God wanted me to do with my life. There could be no turning back. The audience’s positive response to the *What Time Is It?* performance in London gave me fuel to go the next leg of the race. Traveling and performing with Kwame Alexander, Toni Blackman, Marshall Johnson, Mike Williams, and other serious-minded talented artists reinvigorated my desire to do what I was born to do.

The Pageantry of PuppeTainment

Like many young African American women, I grew up watching the Miss America Pageant, in hopes of becoming a beauty pageant queen one day. Beauty pageants like the Miss America Pageant and the Miss Black America Pageant (which just celebrated its Fiftieth Anniversary) exist to provide personal and professional opportunities for young women and promote their voice in community, culture, and politics. African American beauty pageant winners such as actress/singer Vanessa Williams, who was the first African American Miss America 1993, and billionaire media mogul and philanthropist Oprah Winfrey, who was Miss Black Tennessee 1971, competed in pageants which helped them to achieve the American Dream of wealth and success.

The next level of opportunity for PuppeTainment came in 1995, when I won the Ms. Black World Beauty and Modeling Pageant. This milestone opened a plethora of doors of opportunity for my puppets. I competed in pageants using my talent of puppetry to expand opportunities to grow PuppeTainment Productions. As Ms. Black World, I was able to go to places where children could meet Ms. Black World and experience life-changing puppet shows that would motivate them to make good choices and to be the best that they could be. In 1995, I secured a contract with Anheuser-Busch to perform

The Great Kings and Queens of Africa Storytelling Puppet Show at various African American conventions in the United States.



Yolanda Sampson is crowned Ms. Black World 1995. Photo courtesy Yolanda Sampson.

PuppeTainment Goes Digital

With the extensive Ms. Black World travel itinerary, God gave me the revelation that I could reach even more children through video. In 1995, my performance troupe turned to a video production company for assistance. It was with financial resources obtained from being Ms. Black World and its appearances that I was able to 100% finance and produce my first video production, *What Time Is It?*, which was an elaboration of the skit that I first performed at Randle Highlands Elementary School so many years earlier. In *What Time Is It?*, Lovuro (an alien from the fictional planet of Peacuro) hits the streets of Washington, DC to gain an understanding of the community's problems. Lovuro captures the spotlight as she learns about drugs from Papa D, embraces Laquifah (the homeless girl), and helps Delfonzo (the drug dealer) to live a drug-free life. *Billboard* magazine said that PuppeTainment Production's first video was "endlessly creative and pulled no punches." Former International President of Blockbuster Video Scott Barrett said that *What Time Is It?* reaches, in a compelling fashion, the heart of our Community Service Program, which is "to provide our members with helpful family-oriented videos in the general categories of health, safety, education and quality of life."

Writing and performing the puppet scripts helped me to grapple not only with the community's problems but with my own. For example, one of my most compelling shows resulted from my own dealings with an unscrupulous businessman who promised to deliver an important video product to me. But he lied and would not accept responsibility for his action, which impacted my business and prohibited me from successfully completing an important project on time. This negative business experience was the creative engine for my next video production, *Tell It Like It Is*. On the heels of *What Time Is It?*, PuppeTainment Productions produced and premiered *Tell It Like It Is* at the Smithsonian Museum of American History in 1999. The video provides an upbeat message about the importance of telling the truth rather than lies. It shows real-life situations through puppets, music, and skits that depict different ways lies are told and the consequences of dishonesty. The video leaves its viewers mesmerized as they travel with Lovuro as she finds that earthlings are not always honest in their relationships with their family and friends, causing some sticky situations and unfortunate mishaps.

PuppeTainment Takes a Sabbatical

In 2000, the unexpected happened. I felt God's urging to deepen my theological study. It would require one of the bravest moves of my life and dramatically alter my business. The doors of PuppeTainment Productions were temporarily shut as I embarked on a three-and-a-half-year journey to receive a Master of Divinity degree from Fuller Theological Seminary in Pasadena, California. It was a grueling yet highly rewarding journey that I knew would deepen the work of PuppeTainment and the body of Jesus Christ more broadly.

The three-year sabbatical was worth the wait. In 2003, just before graduating with my Master of Divinity degree, I wrote and produced *Can You Handle It?*, which addresses the issues of dishonesty and low self-esteem. With the increasing pandemic of depression and suicide among youth, I knew the puppets needed to tell an inspiring story. This newest video highlights children's desire to be authentic and strengthens that impulse over against their emerging need to do whatever is necessary to fit in. Without being preachy, it empowers children to be true to their real selves as opposed to wearing



On The Agape Love Train, Yolanda and her puppet Lovuro are on a mission to spread the love of Jesus Christ. Photo courtesy Yolanda Sampson.

a costume of lies that they think everyone else will like. The storyline features Lovuro in a struggle with her parents, King Positivo and Queen Happinuro. On her journey to the planet Earth, Lovuro turns from her dishonest ways to the words of God, thanks to the Guardians and all her down-to-earth “homies.”

GO Y.O. Worldwide, LLC

In 2015, GO Y.O. Worldwide, LLC emerged on the global platform to create and distribute fun products that educate and empower elementary-aged children to live out their Christian faith. Our Bible-based lessons inspire children to be the best they can be, so they can make a positive impact in the world. GO Y.O.’s inaugural project, *GO Y.O. Forgive!* explores the biblical principle of forgiveness, which again is an outgrowth of my own tsunami of personal challenges that flooded my life and challenged me to embody such forgiveness. The message of forgiveness is ubiquitous and timeless. Everybody needs to forgive somebody because hurt and pain transcend race, class, education, political affiliations and cultures. Traveling to different places around the world, like the Tipi Wakan Children’s Church located on the Standing Rock Indian Reservation in Cannon Ball, North Dakota, and the SOS Orphanage in Colón, Panama, I have conducted biblical forgiveness puppet-making workshops, teaching the children how to make their own power puppets in portable pulpits.

As the business and ministry of GO Y.O. Worldwide, LLC continues to evolve, there’s a renewed inspiration for me to be used by God to produce more puppet shows digitally to share the love of Jesus Christ and offer solutions to our community’s problems. With the current issues of gun violence in the schools, suicide, bullying, racial tensions, and immorality, the ancient craft of puppetry has never been more relevant in addressing our world. Puppet power in portable pulpits will never lose its power to impact change in our world in the mighty name of my Lord and Savior Jesus Christ.