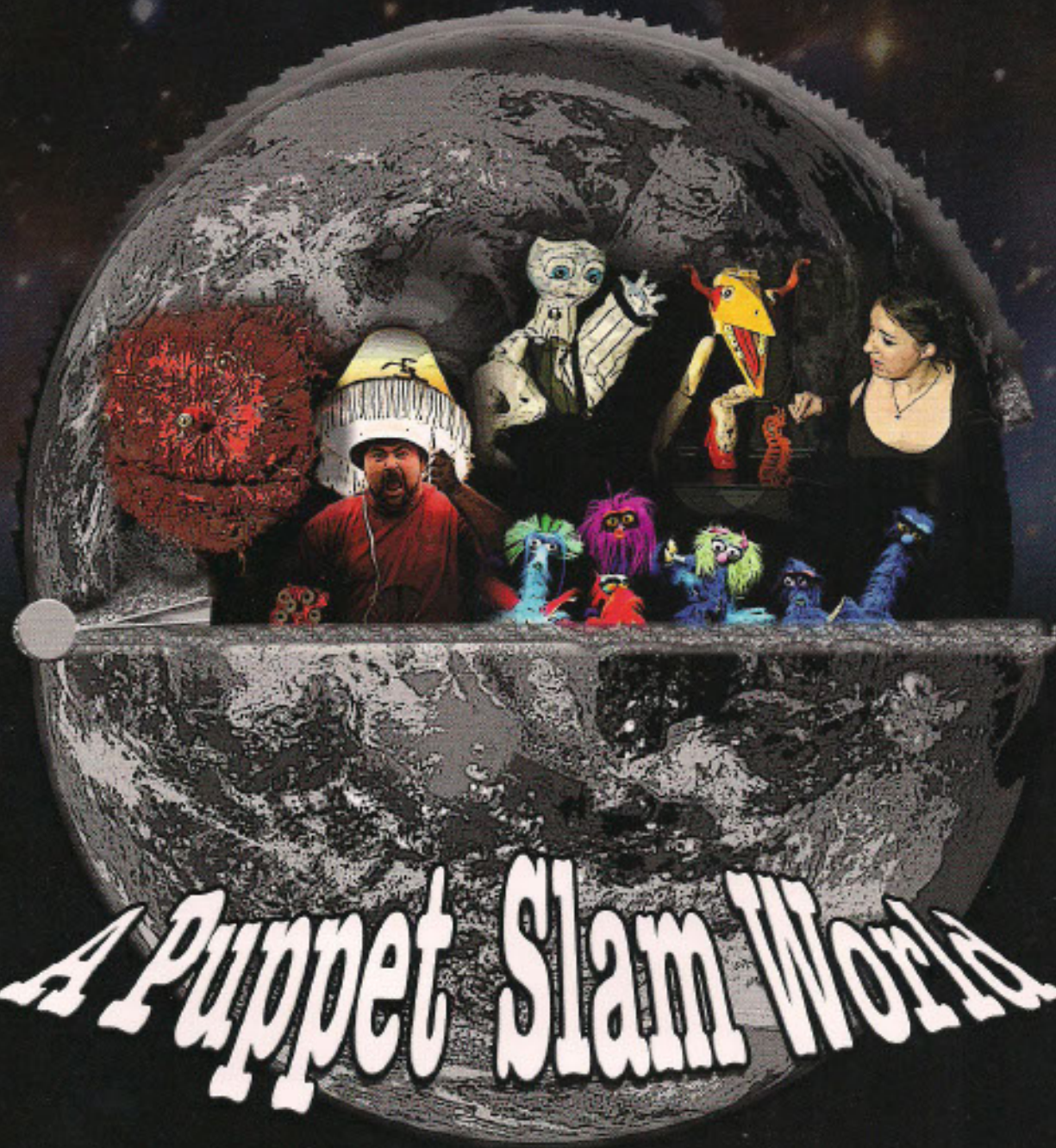


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The **PUPPETRY**  
*Journal*



*A Puppet Slam World*

**In Praise of Slams, Cabarets,  
and the Love of Short Form Puppetry**

# How to Host a Slam:

## A Users Guide to Get You Going

by Kat Pleviak, Mary Kate Rix, Tom Pleviak, and Joanna Iwanicka

So, you want to host a slam but have no idea how to start? We know how that feels. Since we opened Sea Beast Puppet Company in 2009 hosting a slam was one of our major goals but always seemed too daunting to produce on our own. However, as the years have rolled by we have seen slams popping up all over the country in theaters, bars, and festivals as well as grabbing press in print and on the web including their own network at [puppetslamnetwork.com](http://puppetslamnetwork.com). So we decided if everyone else can do it why not us?

To make a long story short six months after we asked that question, we hosted our first puppet slam on June 23, 2011 called "Puppet Meltdown" and it went so well we are planning to do it again in July 2012. But these facts alone don't make for a particularly interesting article so we pooled our collective experience from our first slam and have placed it here for you to use as a guide to starting your own. Unfortunately, there is only so much we can cover in a short article but if you, like us, find yourself with the passion for hosting a slam but feel a bit shaky on the know-how, we hope this guide will help you get started on your own puppet slam adventure.

### Getting Started

Slams don't happen on their own; they take a lot of work, and the more people you have to help, the better. Start by assembling a production team, or core group of people willing to take on the responsibility of making the slam happen. For our slam we had four people on the production team, but there is no magic number. What's important is that you identify and prioritize what needs to get done throughout the process and divide the work up in a manageable way.

Now that you have a team of people committed to making your event happen we suggest that you come up with a mission

statement for your slam. It may seem a bit formal but it will help you make decisions along the way and keep your team and event focused. Slams do not have any formal rules or regulations; the only consistent factors we have observed are that the pieces be short and aimed at adults, so you can custom tailor your event in any way you choose.

- Will you include video submissions?
- Will you pick a theme?
- What is your definition of puppetry?

With so many options it's easy for an event to lose its way and become muddled. Even though this will be a collection of small works they should relate to one another in some way. To help establish your mission statement ask yourself these two questions: Why am I producing this event? and What do I want this slam to accomplish? These answers will lead you to your mission statement and get you on your way.

### The Budget

One of the biggest considerations when putting on a slam is the budget. Slams don't have to cost a lot but there are a few general expenses to keep in mind such as the venue, marketing, and any special equipment you'll need to provide. For example, for "Puppet Meltdown" we needed to custom-build a projection screen for the video portions of the show. Keep track and catalog any and all expenses that come up during your process. This will be a valuable reference tool for your next slam.

When it comes to start-up capital there are a few avenues to consider: you can find a partner to sponsor you such as a local business or sister company, you can apply for local grants from larger organizations such as the Puppetslam Network, or you can host a fundraiser through a website like [kickstarter.com](http://kickstarter.com). For our slam we partnered with the Chicago Puppetry Guild, who fronted the money for our slam and was reimbursed using the ticket sales from the performance.

Marketing is another crucial part of any slam; you want people to show up, after all. For tight-budget slams the Internet is your best friend! Social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter are excellent, free-to-use methods to get the word out. For Sea Beast an event page on Facebook, linked to our company's Twitter page combined with both e-mail blasts and word-of-mouth, worked marvelously and didn't cost us a dime.

### Submissions

At this point you have your staff and have figured out your budget; it's time to find your performers. To do this you first need to establish some guidelines and criteria—the things you're looking for from your prospective puppeteers and their pieces. When setting your criteria always go back to your mission statement to be sure each choice you make supports your overall goal. For "Puppet Meltdown" we judged each submission using four general criteria.

- First, medium: what kind of puppetry is featured in the piece?



The Crew of Puppet Meltdown 2011: from left to right, Nate Rix, Steve Leito, Mary Kate Rix, Kat Pleviak, Joanna Iwanicka, Tom Pleviak (Photographer unknown)



The selection crew reviewing submissions: from left to right, Mary Kate Rix, Kat Pleviak, Tom Pleviak, Joanna Iwanicka. Photo by Char Pleviak

- Second, length: how long will the piece run?
- Third, tech: how complicated are the technical requirements for the piece?
- And finally, skill level: How polished is the piece? Does it look performance-ready?

Having set criteria before you start your process will help you make those hard decisions during the selection process and make it easier to communicate with puppeteers who don't make the cut.

Once your criteria are established it's time to put the word out and bring in some artists. You can use the social media sites you are using in your marketing campaign and the myriad of puppetry websites such as [puppethub.com](http://puppethub.com) and [puppetslam.com](http://puppetslam.com) to announce your event. For "Puppet Meltdown" we found it helpful to have a standardized application that interested performers could acquire through our website and then email back to us. This ensured we had all the information we needed and clearly communicated our preset guidelines to the performers. We asked for the names/number of the performers, the title and a brief description of the piece (including style and running time), the technical requirements needed for performance and a video of their piece or, in the case of works in progress, of a similar piece the artist had already performed.

## The Venue

The venue sets the stage for your event so pick one that's right for your show.

- First, consider the location. Is it in an easily accessible area?
- Second, think about the size. How big is the space? Make sure the house is right for puppets. Don't go too big; puppet performances generally benefit more from smaller, more intimate settings than from bigger houses.
- Third, consider the house rules. Be aware of any restrictions the venue may have and make sure your slam can abide by them. If you need to alter the space in any way make sure you discuss that with the venue before you book the space.

Any space with enough room for performers and an audience will do, but as this is a live performance you'll probably be best served renting a designated performance space. These venues are more likely to have the technical

equipment you need and a staff that understands the requirements of your event.

## Tech and Rehearsal

With your submissions and venue set, now you need to figure out how to make your event run smoothly. We highly recommend having a tech rehearsal. Bring your performers together and show them the space; it's a chance to discuss each piece with your performers and show them what they can expect to have available the night of the show. This does not have to be a full run of the show; for our slam we asked for at least one representative from each puppet company to come for a 30 minute tech session, just to talk through their performances and give tech cues to the board operator. Sometimes puppet shows can get messy so it's good to discuss the use of powders, liquids, and special effects within each act, just to make sure the pieces are following the rules of the venue. As slams often involve a lot of people, schedules may not always align; so it is not unusual for tech to be held on the day of the show.



Joanna Iwanicka setting up the tech for Puppet Meltdown. Photo by Mary Kate Rix

When you finish your tech you need to place all the pieces in order. Consider for each piece the technical requirements, set-up and take-down time, subject matter and medium. You want to be mindful of both the physical and artistic flow from piece to piece. It's your job to think of the evening as a whole.

## The Performance

Finally, the big night arrives! The audience is seated, your performers are ready, and all your hard work and preparation are about to pay off. In a perfect world your job would be done, but things hardly ever go the way we plan. After all, it wouldn't be live theater if something didn't go wrong. You'll never be able to anticipate everything that might happen, so just be flexible and prepared in case something does go wrong. To that end the importance of good teamwork cannot be overstated. Don't be afraid to delegate to your production team. Be honest about your abilities and limitations and ask for help when you need it. Don't be a hero!

To help avoid unexpected problems there are a few simple things you can do to be prepared for backstage disasters. Having some extra equipment and materials for emergencies is a good catch-all safety plan. Everything from extra tape, safety pins, and even a sewing kit are good to have on hand, and having a first aid kit is never a bad idea.

You should also be prepared in case a performer cannot do their piece. In our case we had several pieces pull out during the weeks before the show so we brought a few of our own pieces to fill in. If you do have pieces pull out of your lineup be mindful of how this affects the flow of your performance and be ready to switch things around if needed.

During the performance things are going to be busy backstage from start to finish. To help with traffic control you should have a run crew member available to move from the box office to backstage. Having a presence throughout the venue will keep you aware of everything that's happening backstage and in the audience and will be invaluable in alerting you to any problems that may arise. For production staff communication headsets are great, but if they are not an option at your venue, texting on your phone makes a great makeshift walkie-talkie.

For "Puppet Meltdown" we had a crew of six running the show: two people in the booth running cues, a stage manager and an aide communicating with the performers backstage, and two people who were available as extra stage hands floating between the front and back of the house in case of emergencies and to take photos of the event. Our venue took care of ticket sales and concessions; however, don't forget to have at least one person running each of these if this service is not provided. Again, as this is *your* slam, never forget that your main job boils down to hospitality. You need to make sure your investors, performers, audience and venue are all happy. Keep this in mind and you will ensure everyone has a good time and you will get to do other slams in the future.

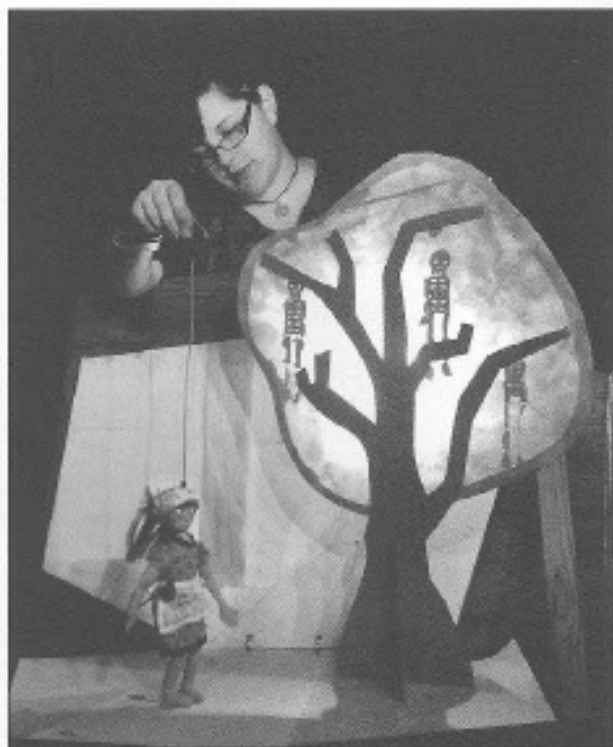
### Post Show

Congratulations on a great slam! Now there are just a few final loose ends that need tying up before we leave this event.

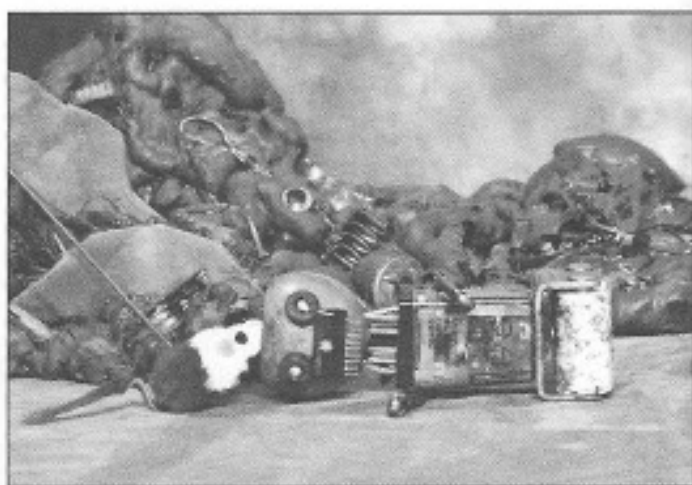
- First, you should calculate how much money was generated and if you made a profit.
- Next, once the profits have been totaled you'll need to pay back your investors.
- Then you'll want to follow up with your performers and venue and thank them for their work. If any payment was agreed upon for the performers this is also a good time to inform them of when and how they'll be receiving their payment. Having a system already in place for payment when you put out a call for submissions will help with any discrepancies that might arise after the show. Paypal is a good option for this if you're not comfortable sending checks in the mail.

When you contact your performers give them an opportunity to provide you with feedback about their experience; this will help you improve your process the next time around. Once your investors and performers have been squared away you and your production team should sit down and discuss the slam overall: what went well, what went wrong, and what can be improved upon for next time. Based on the profits made, the positive and negative feedback from the performers, and the overall reception by the audience you should be able to figure out how often you want to repeat this process so you can start gearing up for your next amazing slam!

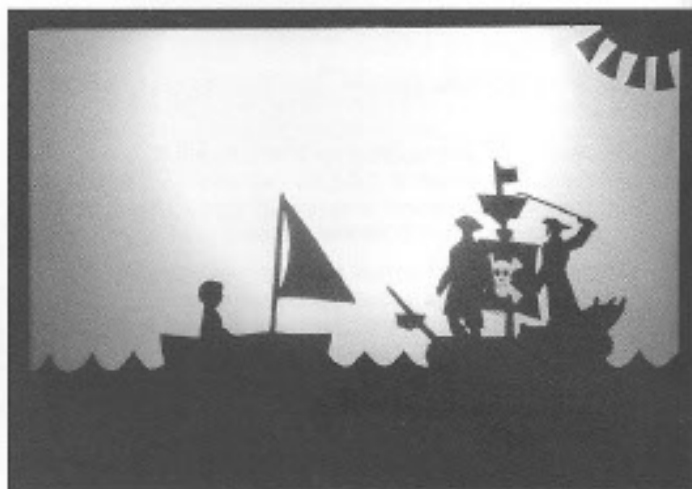
*Sea Beast Puppet Company was founded in 2009 and resides in Glen Ellyn, IL. Their mission is to promote excellence in puppetry through imaginative storytelling and provide an opportunity for people of all ages to view puppet performances. The company is comprised of Artistic Director Kat Pleviak, Mary Kate Rix, Tom Pleviak, and Joanna Iwanicka.*



"Annie's Tale," by Mary Kate Rix. Photo by Kat Pleviak



"Another Man's Treasure" by Kat Pleviak, with Megan Thiel. Photo by Tom Pleviak



"Best Day Ever," by Kat Pleviak and Mary Kate Rix. Photo by Tom Pleviak