



## THE ART OF VENTRILOQUISM

- 1 We all know that puppets or dummies can't talk. But if you happen to be watching a talented *ventriloquist* at work, you might just find yourself believing that the dummy you are looking at really is alive. A ventriloquist's act can be described as a trick or an illusion for the ear, just as magic is an illusion for the eye.
- 2 In Ancient Greece, people used *ventriloquism* to pretend they were speaking with the voices of the dead. This was called *gastromancy*, and

a lot of Ancient Greeks believed that this was a way of seeing the future. During the Middle Ages, ventriloquism was seen as a type of witchcraft. It was only in the 16th century that ventriloquism was recognised as a form of entertainment.

- 3 By the 19th century, ventriloquism was popular, but not comical. People loved seeing a performer change voices and bring little characters to life on stage. Edgar Bergen made comic ventriloquism popular in the early 20th century with his dummy,

Charlie McCarthy. This comic style has continued throughout the last century and is what most people imagine when they think about ventriloquism today.

- 4 Ventriloquism, also known as "throwing your voice", comes from the ancient Latin words *venter* ("belly") and *loqui* ("to speak"). It was thought that ventriloquists used their bellies or stomachs in an unusual way to perform their art and so were "speaking from the belly".
- 5 In reality, the words don't come from the belly, although good stomach breathing does help a performer's voice. The words are formed normally but the ventriloquist's breath is let out slowly through the mouth, which is almost closed.
- 6 The ventriloquist's tongue is kept right in the back of the mouth. Only the tip of the tongue moves. Speaking this way puts pressure on the ventriloquist's vocal chords. This projects the sound out, and the illusion of distance is increased by more pressure. Ventriloquists are able to "throw" their voices so it seems to be coming from the dummy.
- 7 Most of us are able to say nearly all of the letters of the alphabet fairly well without moving our lips. However, the letters that can't be said in an understandable way make a ventriloquist's act hard to follow. A ventriloquist gets over this problem by substituting sounds and saying hard letters quickly. The listener's brain automatically fills in the letters and sounds. A good ventriloquist will use the entire audience in the show without anyone realising!
- 8 Ventriloquists also try to make their acts humorous. They perform jokes and comedy sketches. This distracts the audience from the letters that are not really being said properly. The audience is so busy laughing or waiting for the punch line of

a joke, they don't focus on the letters that aren't being pronounced correctly.

- 9 The ventriloquist's dummy plays a very important part in the illusion. Ventriloquists often use dummies that are a theatrical model of a human being. For example, a little schoolboy dummy may have a cheeky grin, large shiny eyes, a shock of bright hair and the face of a naughty elf. An old man dummy might have big jaws, square cheeks, a bulging red nose, large sticking-out ears and messy hair. These overdone features help to draw the audience's attention to the figure on the stage.
- 10 The way the dummy is dressed and the colours it wears also adds to its own personality. This makes the audience more willing to believe that it is a person, rather than a part of the ventriloquist's act.

A ventriloquist's dummy is often the exact opposite of the ventriloquist who is using it. This helps to create a better illusion of two people on stage, rather than one person and a dummy.

- 11 The type of character the dummy is will determine the voice the ventriloquist will use. For example, if a schoolboy dummy is used, the ventriloquist will use a high-pitched voice and perhaps speak in short, broken, jerky sentences. For the old man dummy, the voice used might be gruff and deep. Ventriloquists match the right voice to the right dummy to make the dummy seem more lifelike.
- 12 The ventriloquist's dummy must also have a moving mouth. It is usually made with a hole in its head or body that lets the ventriloquist's hand get into the dummy to move the mouth. This movement of the mouth makes the dummy "come alive".

