

Puppet Therapy

By Pamela Morgan

Synopsis: A young man terrified to speak to women seeks an unconventional therapist to help him breakthrough.

Location: Video Call

Characters: 1 man, 1 woman

Xander: Any race, 20s, male, terrified of women

Dr. Henson: Any race, any age, female, a therapist with an unconventional practice

Xander is on Zoom.

XANDER

Hi. Hello. Uh...hi. (*Dr. Henson appears on zoom. Xander immediately hides his face, turns away. As if through gritted teeth*) Camera. Off.

HENSON

Would that make you more comfortable, Xander? (*he nods, not looking at Dr. Henson. She covers her camera*) Have you been using your mantra?

XANDER

I have, but it's not helping, Dr. Henson.

HENSON OC

Let's try it together. Close your eyes. (*Xander does*) Can you say it for me?

XANDER

(*mumbling*) I am strong, confident and worthy of being loved.

HENSON OC

A little louder, Xander.

XANDER

(*a little louder, but still very unsure*) I am strong, confident and worthy of being loved.

HENSON OC

Better. Can you say it once more, with feeling?

XANDER

(*loudly*) I am strong, confident and worthy of being loved! (*he opens his eyes and looks off camera, suddenly embarrassed*) Sorry! That was me, I'll close the door. (*he gets up to close the door and returns*) I'm such an idiot.

HENSON OC

Xander, you have nothing to be ashamed of, you are all of those things and you are worthy of being loved. *(short pause)* Are you able to talk to me now? *(Xander shakes his head violently)* You understand I'm a safe person that you can share with.

XANDER

It doesn't matter. We talked about this last time.

HENSON OC

We did. We were working on your inability to communicate with women in our last session.

XANDER

I can't talk to them. I can't even look at them. Do you know how hard it is? 56% of public transit users are female so I can't take a bus, I can't eat out at restaurants because 70% of servers are women. 69% of baristas at Starbucks are women. I wrote my order down on a piece of paper and this morning I forgot my name so I said uhhhh. And that's what she wrote on the cup. Uhhh, your order is ready! I stood there for over an hour, thinking they forgot about me but too afraid to ask where my coffee was! *(silence for a moment)* Say something, it feels like you're judging me!

HENSON OC

I'm not judging you, Xander. It would be a lot easier if you let me come on camera. I'm trying to understand what causes this anxiety in you. Have you always felt this way?

XANDER

Not always, no.

HENSON OC

Do you know when it started? *(Xander shakes his head)* I have an idea, Xander. Sometimes we can use representations to help ourselves ease into real life situations. I brought a friend with me today. More than one, but I think this friend is a good place to start. Their name is Wully. *(camera turns on and we see Wully, a monster puppet, held by Dr. Henson)* Wully, can you say hello to our friend Xander?

WULLY

Hello, Xander. Me Wully.

HENSON

(a short pause where Xander says nothing) Xander, is it hard for you to talk to Wully?

XANDER

Frankly I think it's insane to talk to a puppet.

HENSON

Why don't you try to tell Wully how you're feeling?

XANDER

I'm feeling... sad? *(unsure of what to say next)* Lonely? I don't know.

WULLY

Why you so sad, Xander?

XANDER

Because I can't fricking talk to women, that's why! My life is a living hell. I decided to pursue a career in trucking, do I look like a trucker? No, but you know how many women are truckers? Almost none. I have to shop at Farm and Fleet. Do you want to know what you can get at Farm and Fleet? Tackle, which I also took up as a hobby and I hate fishing. But so do women, apparently. And on the rare occasion that a woman happens into the tackle section of the local Farm and Fleet, do you know where I go to hide?

WULLY

Where you hide?

XANDER

In the whity tighty section of the men's underwear, because who the hell wears those anymore? This guy.

HENSON

(pulling WULLY down) Xander, I feel like you're making some very strong statements and I think we need to examine where this comes from, this fear of women.

XANDER

Camera!

HENSON

(turning off her camera again) I have another friend for you to meet. Her name is Sally. Sally, this is Xander, he's having a really hard time talking to girls.

XANDER

Can we say women? Girl sounds demeaning, like I'm a prepubescent child. (off camera girlish giggle)

HENSON OC

Women. Sorry. Xander has a hard time speaking to women, do you think he would have a hard time talking to you? Xander, do you think you can talk to Sally?

XANDER

I think this is really stupid and I don't understand why I'm talking to puppets.

SALLY (in a real girlish voice, OC)

Hi, Xander. I'm Sally. I would love to be friends.

XANDER

Ok, I guess we're doing this anyway.

SALLY (*turning camera on*)

You're really cute.

XANDER

No. Nope, nuh uh. Done.

HENSON

Give it a try, Xander. I use puppets in my practice with all kinds of clients. Don't think of her as a puppet, think of her as a special friend who wants to help you by practicing real life situations.

SALLY

With a girl, like me.

HENSON

He prefers the word woman.

SALLY (*with attitude*)

Fine, (*over exaggerating the word*) woman.

HENSON

Sally, it's important that we honor the wishes of our clients, we want them to feel safe.

SALLY (*outburst*)

What about me and my feelings? Don't I get a say in any of this?

XANDER

Yeah...I think I'm good.

SALLY (*turning on Xander*)

You are not good, Xander, you can barely string together two words over a zoom call to a therapist who hasn't worn a bra in 9 months.

HENSON

Excuse me, my clients do not need to know that information.

SALLY

Silence, shrink. Xander, look at me. Here, my eyes are here. Take a good long look at me. (*pause*) What do you see?

XANDER

Umm...I see a puppet.

SALLY

(*intensely*) Look deeper.

XANDER

I see yarn for hair and felt for skin?

SALLY

(*very very intense*) Deeper, Xander, come on, dig down deep, man!

XANDER

I guess I see . . . (*he stares into the puppets eyes, she stares back, he stares deeper, she stares deeper then...*) Sadness, maybe . . . fear? Oh so much fear. I'm afraid all the time, Sally. I'm afraid people are judging me. Do you also feel that way? (*Sally nods*) Do you ever look at someone else and feel terrified to even say hello? I changed my whole life to avoid them. But I'm lonely, I'm so lonely. I want someone to love and who loves me back. I want to connect with

someone on a deeper level, but there doesn't seem to be any way for me to break past that fear to really connect. How do I do that?

SALLY

You toughen the fuck up, Xander, that's how.

HENSON

Oh, Sally, that is not okay! I'm going to put her away for now. *(she removes Sally from the screen)* I'm sorry, Xander.

XANDER

(urgently) No, please don't. . . *(beat)* I like talking to Sally. I know it sounds insane but I feel like she gets me. You're right, Dr. Henson, this really works. I feel more comfortable sharing on a deeper level with a puppet--

HENSON (using Sally's voice)

I prefer "woman"!

XANDER

I feel more comfortable sharing with you, when you're Sally.

HENSON

You mean, with me and Sally?

XANDER

No, with you . . . as Sally.

HENSON

Sally needs to rest, she tends to get a little moody. Let's you and I talk for a little while. You said you feel like people are judging you, what did you mean by that?

XANDER

(starting to close back up now that the puppet is gone) I don't know.

HENSON

Do you feel you struggle to connect with others?

XANDER

I guess, I don't know.

HENSON (using Sallys' voice)

He didn't struggle to connect with me!

XANDER

You can bring her back out.

HENSON

Oh, I most definitely will not be bringing her back. But I do have another friend I'd like you to meet. I think you'll relate well to her. (in Sally's voice) Don't even think about bringing her out!

XANDER

Dr. Henson, I'm getting a little confused...

SALLY

(coming back onto camera) That concrete brickhead you call a puppet! Don't listen to this whackjob, Xander. I'm your friend, I'm your only friend, not some brick shitting representation of your inner demons!

XANDER

Dr. Henson, maybe we should stop?

HENSON

No, Sally needs to stop. She needs to remember that she is not the only puppet we use with clients and to make space for all of our friends.

SALLY

I think you're bringing HER out because you like her better than you like me!

HENSON

Like her better than..? I am not having this conversation now, I am with a client.

SALLY

He wouldn't connect with that clay bitch, he won't bear his soul like he did—*(Henson silences Sally by placing a hand over her mouth)* mhhfmd. *(Henson holds her hand a moment longer over the puppet's mouth)*

HENSON

Are you done? *(Sally nods)* I'm letting go now. *(Henson releases Sally's mouth)*

SALLY

I love you, Xander, I will always love you, don't forget that you saw into my soul! *(Henson pulls Sally from camera and turns to put Sally away off camera, Sally calls from off camera)* I saw into yours too, Xander, and it was beautiful! Don't listen to this shrink, she doesn't understand you like I do. *(perhaps sound of a lid closing, no more Sally, Henson turns back to camera)*

HENSON

She's gone now. How are you feeling, Xander?

XANDER

Honestly, Doctor, I'm wondering if you need some help.

HENSON

You made a genuine connection with a woman that wasn't right for you. Of course you're feeling defensive and vulnerable and you want to lash out at me.

XANDER

It was a puppet!

HENSON

Right. A puppet woman. But you felt something, didn't you? *(a beat and Xander nods)* You felt a connection. And that means you can feel that again, that we're getting somewhere, we're breaking through. I want to bring out one last friend for you to meet. *(Henson brings up a delicate puppet)* She's beautiful, isn't she? Do you want to give our friend a name? I don't have one for her yet. *(In Sally's voice)* I got one, how about Terracotta Hut, rhymes with--. *(as Henson, cutting off Sally)* Not another word out of you! Xander, do you have a name?

XANDER

(a little terrified now) Rose, I guess?

HENSON

Ok, Xander, let's call her Rose. Hello, Rose, can you say hello to Xander?

XANDER

Please don't...

ROSE *(gentle, loving voice, but sounding most like Henson's voice)*

Hello, Xander.

SALLY

(leaping into camera) Don't you dare "hello Xander" him, he is mine!

ROSE

Now, Sally, I believe the good Doctor has asked you to stay quiet and out of sight. Are we having some listening issues?

SALLY

I'm not the one with bricks for brain. Xander, tell Rose how you feel about me, tell her!

XANDER

Is this a joke?

SALLY

Do I look like a joke to you? Did it feel like a joke when you stared deep into my eyes and connected with me on a level that you've never connected with another human being before?

XANDER

But you're not a human being, you're a puppet!

ROSE

Sorry, Sally, you're just a sad little joke.

SALLY

No, I will not be called a joke by a goddamn Grecian urn. You're nothing but a clay jug! *(Sally pushes Rose, Rose pushes back, a freeform fight ensues for the next minute, Henson should adlib some insults and fighting sounds, Xander watches a little fascinated, a little frightened. The puppets should be fighting fiercely, even dirty fighting if possible (yarn pulling, eye poking) then Sally should triumphantly perform a major wrestling finishing move on Rose and they both fall out of sight of the camera, with Sally giving a victorious cry. Maybe Henson needs to turn off screen at this point. Henson and Xander stares at the screen for a few beats)*

XANDER

(lightbulb moment, he calls to Henson to stop the fight) Doctor...I get it! I understand!

HENSON

(confused) You do?

XANDER

Yes, Rose was my fear, right? And Sally is me, confident, strong, worthy of love. She takes what she wants and doesn't let anyone stop her. And you had them fight because you want me to face my own fears, like Sally faced Rose, and to conquer them!

HENSON

Yes...yes, that's exactly it!

XANDER

I mean, for a minute there, Dr. Henson, I thought you were absolutely nuts. I was terrified! With the puppets and the crazy talking and the "look into my eyes" and then Rose and the fight. I mean, you really committed! And I don't even need the puppets to talk to you anymore! Thank you, Dr. Henson.

HENSON

Oh, I didn't do any of this work, that was all you and Sally and Rose. We're all out of time today, but I think that we've really found something we can explore some more in our next session.

XANDER

I totally agree and I can't wait to see what you do next time.

HENSON

You know we always end with your mantra, Xander. Are you ready? *(he nods)*

XANDER

(proudly, strongly) I am strong, confident and worthy of being loved. *(he smiles)* Thank you, I'll see you next week. *(he leaves call)*

SALLY

(Sally starts coming onto camera from where she went down with Rose. She should have some piece of Rose, if possible...hair, eye, arm, clothing, some trophy) Point and match, we did it again! High five?

HENSON

You went too far today.

SALLY

He needs to grow a pair!

HENSON

(upset, flustered) I mean with Rose, what was that? And telling him you loved him, you're making us sound unhinged, it doesn't look professional!

SALLY

(intensely) Look at me.

HENSON

No, I won't. I don't want to.

SALLY

(more intensely) Dr. Henson, take a good long look at me. *(Henson looks, pause)* What do you see?

HENSON

I guess I see...*(she stares into the puppets eyes, Sally stares back, she stares deeper, Sally stares deeper then...)* So much fear, of losing the respect of my clients and my colleagues. Sometimes I don't even know what I'm doing, like today I lost all control and I didn't know how to bring it all together again. Do you ever feel that way? *(Sally nods)* But you saved it for me, you did that, Sally. You make me a better therapist.

SALLY

What do I always tell you to say, do you remember? *(Henson nods her head)* Say it for me.

HENSON

(without much conviction) I am strong, confident--

SALLY

(intensely) Louder!

HENSON

I am strong, confident, and worthy of being loved! *(Sally leans in and gives Henson a hug)*

End of play.