

## **International Thespian WORKSHOP CREATIVE EXERCISES FOR CLASS WORK OR PLAY REHEARSAL**

### **TABLE TALK:**

During the first week, it is a great idea for students to gain “ownership” of the show through their research. It’s kind of a “show and tell” for all actors AND technical crews.

VISUAL MEDIA (Television, film, documentaries, commercials, etc.)

MUSIC

VISUAL ART

PHOTOS

MAGAZINES, NEWSPAPERS

CURRENT EVENTS (or period events!)

POPULAR CULTURE

PHOTO OF THEIR CHARACTER

SOCIAL ISSUES

POLITICAL ISSUES

### **CHARACTER CIRCLE:**

The actors circle up and take turns walking around the circle as their character saying the name of their character. At some point they stop before another actor and the two of them begin to repeat the name until the new actor “becomes” the character. The new actor repeats the character name ‘given’ to him/ her until instructed to ‘walk it off’. Then the actor begins to walk around the circle repeating their character’s name (and mannerisms) and the process repeats itself until all in the circle have had their turn. (This exercise can also be used as a rehearsal warm-up. The actors will circle. One actor will begin a movement and sound and move across the circle to face another actor. Then that actor will repeat the movement and sound until it is identical to the original. That actor will then create his or her own movement/ sound and will cross the circle to a different actor. The process continues until everyone has had a chance to match and create a movement and sound combination.)

### **ACTING CENTERS:**

#### **Part A:**

Actors are asked to image where their characters “live” in their body, i.e. head (intellectual/ nerd), chest (romantic), stomach (lazy), pelvis (sensual), ear, knees, shoulders, nose, etc. The actor will walk around the set until they have connected with their character in the space. As they walk, they are encouraged to begin to speak lines that they speak as the character. This exercise might also be combined with the

#### **Character Walk exercise.**

#### **Part B:**

Actors are asked to image a character that has a profession, career, or major goal in life (accountant, construction worker, or miser, etc.) They are then asked which of the body centers that person might 'lead' with. Again they are asked to walk around the space leading with that part of the body. They might be asked to allow this to influence the other parts of the body, hands, feet, legs, etc. This exercise might also be combined with the **Character Walk exercise**.

### **Part C:**

For the more advanced students. Actors are to come up with a list of adjectives that describe their characters or a person that they know. The actors are then asked to use one of those adjectives to "pull" them from their **Acting Center** through a variety of activities such as walking or sitting in character or performing a daily activity. It might help to imagine that adjective as a "string" that connects to their body center. For example they describe their character as "jealous". They are asked to use a "jealous" string that pulls them across the room from their heart center.

### **STAGES OF LIFE:**

This is a great exercise in finding appropriate movements and vocal work in characterization. Actors are instructed to begin "life" as an infant on the floor. They are instructed to move like an infant of 6 mo. then 1 year then 2 years, 5, 10, 13, 16, 18 20, 25, 30, 35, 40, 45, 50, 55, 60, 70, 80 then the process is reversed 80, 70, 60, etc. This exercise is not to be rushed. The students are asked to greet each other, play, talk about their lives, families, etc., sit, stand, move, WALK, group together, gossip, etc. during the ages that they are playing. The instructor (or director) must continually coach them to allow gravity to work on their muscles and skeletons, their faces, limbs, etc. They are reminded of how their movements change and slow with age, paying special attention to their spines, breathing, pitch and volume of their voices, etc.

### **BLIND KIDS:**

Great ensemble building exercise. Everyone stands in a tight group. With their eyes closed and a hand on someone's shoulder, they are instructed to 'find' the Director. They are instructed to follow the sound of the Director's voice as she/ he moves about the room. The game continues until they catch up with the Director.

### **TACTICS:**

Assign each student a different generic phrase such as "I don't want to talk about it", "I love you", "Leave me alone." "Let's go." "I can't." etc. They are then paired up to say the lines to each other, never changing the line, but adapting its meaning as they react to the other person. The students should be forced through the exercise to use a wide variety of tactics to get what they want.

## **OPERATIVES/ THE WHISPER GAME:**

### **Part A:**

Actors are instructed to sit back to back. They are instructed to “whisper” their lines as though in a crowded room and fearful of being overheard; yet they **MUST** communicate the message of their lines to each other. After the exercise is finished they are encouraged to look at the words that have carried the weight of their intent. (They are especially encouraged to look at the importance of the **final words in their lines!** As young actors we frequently drop pitch and emphasis of the all-important last lines and the natural “lift” that occurs when they really seek to communicate meaning.) I have also heard of using this exercise as though they are in a crowded stadium and must shout out their lines to be heard to find the operatives.

### **Part B:**

For actors who are chronically dropping pitch or losing voice at the end of the sentences, I have them circle the last word or words at the end of each sentence. They are then asked to go through the scene paying special attention to these words.

### **Part C:**

For those actors who still don't ‘get it’ or for advanced work, I have them circle the last word (s) and place a “+ “or a “ - “ or a “ 0 “ after the last word to indicate whether they rise in pitch, stay the same or drop pitch to indicate the end of a series of sentences or end of a thought or intention.

## **WAR/ PAPERWAD FIGHT:**

This is good for moments of conflicts. The Actors are either on the set or they set up their camps. With an arsenal of paperwads, they are encouraged to launch attacks on each other, but they can only “fire” their paperwads when they are speaking or when they feel that they have been “hit” by the other person's words. This activity helps them to discover key words and verbs as well as physical zing their character choices and discovering movement that they can carry over to the dialogue.

## **SET EXPLORATION:**

**Part A:** Actors are instructed to find the “warmest” place that they feel on the set. After they have gone to that place, they are instructed to find the “coldest”. They then are instructed to find the place where they feel the most “vulnerable”, “safest”, “strongest”, “weakest”, “softest”, “hardest”, etc. This is a great way to explore the set and learn to have an emotional attachment to it.

**Part B:** Actors are instructed to move to a part of the set that has a piece of furniture and to use it. After they have gone to the different areas, they are asked to revisit the areas and to use the furniture in a different/ or unusual way. This often leads to discoveries in non-traditional ways of using furniture. It also gives them familiarization with the pieces.

**Part C: Living Set Pieces:** Use cast and crew members to become the set pieces, chairs, etc or to stand behind the actual pieces. When the performers are using these pieces, the “support” members whisper pre-determined lines to the characters using them (such as “You need to dominate everyone or You are a timid, excitable person, or things such as this) For advanced students only.

### **REVERSE ROLES:**

This is a great way to open up a problematic scene. After reversing roles, the actors are encouraged to tell their partner what they found most useful in their characterization. This is not to be confused with an actor directing another actor. The dialogue should be constructive and about the behavior or vocal work that most affected them during the scene.

### **ACTING THE OPPOSITE:**

This is another way to make discoveries during scene work. The actor is asked to identify the dominant need, trait, or mood of their character and to rehearse the scene using this trait. I then ask them to do the scene using the opposite needs trait, emotion or mood. Very good way to open up an actor to other possibilities.

### **IMPROV THE SCENE:**

Students read the scene and discuss their character's intentions, obstacles, the plot and the conflict. After identifying the plot development, they are encouraged to discard their scripts and improvise the action of the scene. They will often find the logic of the scene, its progression, and they are often able to remember the lines that they are using, enabling them to “learn” the lines rather than memorizing them flat.

### **REHEARSAL GOAL SETTING:**

Actors are given a weekly/ daily goal setting sheet. On this sheet the actors are encouraged to set a specific goal for EACH rehearsal. Examples are pacing, volume, intention work, listening and reacting to the ‘other’, etc.

### **LEARN THE ROLE:**

Actors are asked to play the telegraph game with their dialogue for a scene or a monologue. They take each sentence and on a separate sheet of paper they are encouraged to write down only the words that are absolutely necessary. For example in David Mamet’s OLEANNA John says,

John: A **pilot**. **Flying** a plane. The **pilot** is **flying** the plane. He **thinks**: Oh my **God**, my **mind's** been **drifting**! Oh, my **God**! What kind of a **cursed imbecile** am I, that I, with this so **precious cargo** of Life **in my charge**, would allow my **attention to wander**. Why was I **born**? How **deluded** are those who **put their trust** in me... **et cetera**, so on, and he **crashes the plane**.

By writing only what they consider the *key words* they learn to connect the *key thoughts*. They are asked to continue going over the dialogue, each time using fewer and fewer key words until the thoughts are their own and the dialogue is learned.

### **MOMENT BEFORE/ AFTER:**

Often young actors do not visualize or often provide a sketchy idea of the moment before or the moment after a scene. By improvising the actions that might occur before or after a scene they are given the opportunity to 'flesh out' the action preceding and following their scene. Can also be used as a homework assignment that is written down to be handed in or discussed. It must be very specific and lead to the scene work on stage.

### **INTENTION WORK:**

Part A:

Actors read their scene and decide what the other character is doing to them. For example if they feel that the other character is "putting them down" or "being condescending" they would add the line,

"You're being condescending to me, aren't you?"

after **EACH** line of the dialogue in their scene. After they have done the scene this way, they are encouraged to now add the line,

"Stop being condescending to me."

When they have finished with this part of the exercise they are asked to now add the line,

"Keep on being condescending to me".

When the entire exercise is finished they are asked what discoveries they made in the scene or with their relationship with the other actor in the scene.

Part B:

Actors again read their scene and decide what they are doing to the other person. They must put this in actable, intention charged words ( I want to slap you, I want to hold you till you cry, I want to escape from your anger)

They then continue the activity as before saying the intention after each line, “I want to slap you” then again saying “I don’t want to slap you” then saying “You want me to slap you”. This really opens up the scene and connects the dialogue with the intention!

**ANIMAL IMAGE:** (for more advanced scene or class work)

Quite often young actors are not connected with their bodies when approaching a character. The young actor is encouraged to find an animal that their character might be. (It is important that the animal not be a flying bird for obvious reasons.) The actor is then led through a day in the life of this animal from the time it awakens, stalks its prey, eats, and then finally returns to sleep. Then they are asked to improvise their scene as the animal. After they have gone through the scene once, they are asked to repeat the scene and are asked to allow their character to return to a human form slowly allowing some of the animal traits to remain with their character choices in sound and movement.

**TEXTURE WORK:**

Actors are encouraged to bring something that has the “feel” or texture of their character to the rehearsal. While working the scene, the actor is encouraged to use the item somehow and allow the texture to influence the way that they speak and move. After the exercise the actor is asked what discoveries that they may have made regarding their character and the scene.

**COSTUME PIECE:**

During the rehearsal the actors are given different costume pieces. This might be something that the director decides upon or the actor might be asked to bring the piece. The scene is then worked allowing the costume piece to dictate their movement and dialogue. Again the actor is encouraged to share the discoveries that are made.

**PROP WORK:**

Actors are given different props and encouraged to use them within the scene creatively. These props may be prescribed by the director, arbitrarily chosen, or the actor may choose them based upon their character. Again, the actor is asked to share the discoveries that they have made during the exercise.

**FRENCH FARCE;**

Sometimes a scene may seem “stuck” or feel stale. A quick fun way to discovery of purpose is to play the scene as though it is “French farce”. The actors are encouraged to play everything way over the top and to have fun with it. This is grand acting. Wonderfully silly and melodramatic.

### **SOAP OPERA:**

Same procedure as **French Farce** but more easily recognized using a ‘soap opera’ style of acting. Helps to free the actor up to emotional possibilities.

### **OPERA:**

When you have an actor or actors who are playing their lines monotone or missing the emotional opportunities in a scene or monologue, asking the actors to sing their lines as opera just may do the trick! It is a quick fun way to find the greater emotion in a scene and gives the actor permission to explore the sounds of the dialogue. As usual, it is important to discuss the discoveries that are made and to bring them into the scene.

### **SILENT RUNNING:**

This activity is a great way to check your blocking. By going through the scene (or the entire play!) without words, the actors will be forced to think of their roles physically and really connect with the other actors and their intentions. They will often make discoveries about their bodies and gestures that are connected to their intentions.

### **FAST FORWARD:**

When students are acting between the lines or if the show is dragging, a game of “fast forward” can often help with this problem. The actors are asked to go through the scene on fast forward, as fast as they can or as fast as they can WITHOUT rushing the dialogue, just picking up their lines immediately after or ON the last word or phrase.

### **GIBBERISH:**

Students can benefit from a session of “gibberish” lines. This game will help those actors find the physical lives of their character as they cannot rely on the words to help them communicate their intentions.

### **YES, NO:**

Part A: Students are encouraged to go through scenes of conflict using only the lines, “yes” or “no”. One student goes through their lines saying only “Yes, yes, yes, yes...” while the other character can only say “No, no, no, no...” in place of their scripted lines.

Part B: Students are encouraged to go through their scene saying “yes” or “no” after each line—May use whichever is appropriate to the line or strictly using “yes” after each line then go through the scene using “no” only after each line. You might also have one student saying “yes” after each line and the other student in the scene saying “no” after each line.

## **BEHAVIORAL VOCALS:**

To help actors find the sounds that people make in situations that are not part of their script, Anne Bogart in her book, "Viewpoints" suggests a round of improves that call for behavioral vocals. The actors are encouraged to make the sounds that people make while... "waiting at a bus stop and the bus is late" or "sounds that people make while taking a test" or other situations. The director then takes the discoveries back to the scene that they are working on to discover sounds that may be appropriate for it.

**Important note:** *I feel that it is important after each improvisation or rehearsal technique to take a moment to ask the performer what they learned. Getting them to articulate the experience helps to galvanize the work that they have just done. Make sure that you go over the scene as written soon after the improve or technique as well. This takes the discoveries back to the play/ scene.*