



Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute
1980 Volume III: Drama

The Family on Stage: Creative Play Production in the Classroom

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For the past several years, I have been teaching literature to my high school students by separating what they read into the various genres: novel, short story, poetry, drama. I have realized that plays offer the widest range of teaching variations, but I found myself teaching a play just as I would prose: assign parts for oral reading, ask thematic questions, give vocabulary words, identify important quotations. More recently, however, I could no longer avoid two obvious problems with this method. First, drama is a visual art form which demands that I, as teacher-director, help to lead a diversity of students to openly participate in the development of individual and group interpretations of the works. Second, as individuals, students often react very personally to the material, carrying values and private issues into their involvement with the plays.

The objective of this unit is to create an atmosphere—through dramatic technique—where both student and teacher can learn something about those feelings that keep penetrating the classroom environment. In this way, I can help my students at the very least, to acknowledge what they are feeling and, hopefully, to realize through the characters they create (and recreate) that they are not alone when they experience these emotions. It isn't enough that they know what a play is about or which character says what line. When actors work up a part, they search themselves for recollections of emotions that can make the character's motivations "truer." Our students can do the reverse: they can search the characters for valuable pieces of their own personal puzzles.

Certainly, this is a large nebulous endeavor that could easily take up every minute of class time. It is also true that, on many levels, the teacher becomes a lay-psychologist whenever any assignment involves an emotional commitment from kids. Beyond just shared responses, these structured self-explorations in the classroom involve great personal risks. The student is being asked to abandon the tough public facade in order to face himself, and, more dangerously, to face his peers as well. As a teacher, I must have extra-sharp ears and eyes; we all have to be alert to the easily bruised. The distance created by "characters" in role-playing, improvisation, and actual play-acting allows the students to wrangle with a problem while still maintaining control. Not unlike the professional actor's "artistic detachment," the process of moving around inside someone else's head and body gives the student and teacher ample room for discovery without any liability.

Hodgson and Richards point out in *Improvisation : Discovery and Creativity in Drama* , that acting is not really make believe, it is more a "revealing" of aspects of the human condition. ¹ As adults, we should realize that every time we try to be someone else, we're acting; every time we imagine an alternative response to a past situation, we're acting; every time we move into a new conflict while attempting to respond in a predictable

way, we're acting. It is a question of coming to grips with ourselves and our physical environments while developing a set of rules and procedures for coping with myriad relationships. Our students are doing the same thing. They act and act out, i.e., aggressively assume new roles without explanation, all the time. And their personal scenes shift incredibly quickly. For example school roles may break down into the extremes of polite classroom behavior vs. "jive" hallway technique. Home might represent a combination of silent rebellion, sustained acquiescence, seething anger. Very highly stylized, these many postures are often perfected long before they are understood or controlled or even identified.

I refuse to let all that natural practice go to waste. Barnfield points out that improvisation is a "slicing" of life that happens only once in a particular way. ² Life then is a grand series of improvisations. *All* of this material is too vast to be handled within the limits of my classroom. In order to make the relationship between their real-life personae and theatrical improvisational manageable one, I had to find an emotional "issue" that would have some common element for the larger group.

Although their responses are often unpredictably diverse and raw, students are usually willing to discuss family conflicts. Almost all of them live with parents or guardians and many face a world with only one (or only one significant) parental figure. The activities attached to this unit, as well as the suggested plays, will therefore touch upon some aspect of family concerns. An activity might be built around an improvisation where first, a student is arguing in favor of a parttime job. Next, he is forced to argue effectively as the parent who wants free time devoted to study. Becoming the parent involves more than giving the predictable verbal arguments. The student must step into the walk, the gestures, the facial expressions, in fact, as many physicalized characteristics as he can find in his memory or through observation. Perhaps it is more *the way* the parent says something or *the way* the student hears it that determined the outcome of the response. The rules of Stanislavski's method acting, where motivation behind every action is investigated, may be of value here. ³ But it is easy to ramble on about motivations on paper; how do we get the kids to start searching for them?

The only way to describe the strategy behind this unit is to engage the reader in the process. The steps are somewhat parallel to the training procedure of a student-actor:

Step One: Warm-ups

Step Two: Theater Games

Step Three: Role-playing

Step Four: Individual Improvisations

Step Five: Group Improvisations

Step Six: Cuttings from Plays

My definition of each step clarifies the direction in which my activities are meant to proceed.

Once the activities have achieved a fair degree of acceptance from the students, a more relaxed atmosphere can be sustained during the course of the project. Ideally, trust and ease have developed from the realization that everyone, including the teacher is sharing and learning from what outsiders might view as "silly" or "weird." Because of this intimacy, individuals should feel safe enough to allow personal conflicts to surface in

their role-playing and improvisation. However, acting by itself does not necessarily lead to either understanding or accepting what has happened. Also, we, as teacher-directors, may not be able to interpret what we are watching. It is advisable to encourage your students to write out response sheets after those exercises where personal feelings come into play. For example, a student may explain what a certain physicalized moment (e.g. grabbing at an elbow) was supposed to represent about a mother character; further, the same paragraph can explain in what way and for what reasons the motion did or did not mimic the real parent. The motivation is explained, after the fact, in a confidential statement that both forces the student to search for a hidden rationale and allows you to share that moment with him.

In the beginning assume that our students, although flexible and easy-going in most situations, are just as nervous and tight as we are when we face an unfamiliar group or setting. Even in my drama seminar where, for most of us, the major concern was getting the kids actively involved in drama, it took a very long time to get us out of our seats and doing anything. We simply cannot teach what we won't even attempt ourselves. What follows is a series of brief descriptions of the various methods that should lead to movement and to involvement.

Step One : Warm - ups

Using the room and furniture with which you are forced to cope, create a relatively obstacle-free space where students, if only from the waist up, can stretch and flex without touching each other. Getting the kinks out is only half the battle. We have to change the working environment enough so that our students don't assume their typical "literature lesson" stances. If desks are bolted down, get the kids on them, under them, lounging across them. Use the conditions; don't be limited by them. Do this every day for the first few days, reducing the time as the students find it easier to move and to relax themselves.

A good initiation activity would be the "Half Gumby". We all have seen that elastic little man who can stretch and pull in any direction. For this activity, no preparation is necessary; in fact, leave the room alone. Ask the students to pretend to bolt their feet to the floor. A symbolic "bolting" activity might make them laugh, but it forces them to "see" that they are all involved. Next, ask them to bend forward, to the right, backward, and to the left with their arms outstretched. With each side swing, they must stretch a little farther, reaching toward the fingertips of their neighbors. You can vary the tempo of the 90o rotations or the time and verbal pressure given to each s-t-r-e-t-c-h. A brief discussion of how they felt as they reached, touched, didn't touch, can get the kids involved physically with each other without any threatening or complicated contact maneuvers. Also, for students, who feel awkward, out-of-shape, overweight, or even inappropriately dressed, an upper torso exercise removes the stigma of "looking funny" to his/her peers.

Step Two : Theatre Games

This technique is more specific than the generalized movements of the warm-ups. The class takes a first step toward the important concept of the "ensemble." In an acting ensemble character "types," leaders, observers, or critics, among others, are identified and their talents utilized. The same variations exist in the classroom. Most of these students are strangers in all but superficial ways. Through the games, they begin to realize the importance of shared space, time, attention, information, ideas. They also can grow to share their common experiences as teenagers in similar environments. Theater games are meant to spark spontaneity; they are designed also to minimize self-consciousness or fear while improving the ease of movement, speech, and characterization. As Viola Spolin points out:

The game is a natural group form providing the involvement and personal freedom necessary for experiencing.

Games develop personal techniques and skills necessary for the game itself, through playing. Skills are developed at the very moment a person is having all the fun and excitement playing a game has to offer this is the exact time he is truly open to receive them. 4

Concentration and trust are only two examples of what can be learned while “playing the game.” In our seminar, an early game use to get us “involved” with each other physically was called, “The Machine Game.” The creation of the machine incorporated everyone in the room. We all, one by one, added what we felt was a vital part (made up of a repeated motion and sound) to the imaginary contraption our activity was creating. The group was finally working and moving together through play.

In a second game, “Sound and Motion,” a leader creates a movement that repeats a particular noise and motion. He/she moves toward a line of the other group members, eventually indicating (without words or gestures) the person with whom she/he wishes to share the activity. The receiver mirrors the action and then moves off to the original leader position. Using the old Movement as a launching point, the new leader transforms it into his or her own variation and sets out in search of a new receiver. The game inspires relaxation and fun. The teacher-director, sensing shyness, might well take on the role of the first leader to avoid any awkwardness. During all this fun, students are developing skills of coordination, imitation and most certainly, concentration. A series of such games that encourage imitation and re-creation of familiar activities will add to the flexibility of the group; it will also create a storehouse of physical expressions that the ensemble can utilize in later activities.

Step Three : Role - Playing

Here, students attempt to physicalize how they perceive types of characters. Because they must use personal observations, they can work on anyone in any situation: a preachy mother, a moody sister, an infirmed complaining grandparent, an overly protective father. The recreation becomes truer if the student is led to question how and why the physical signals of these characters make their own clear statements.

A short writing assignment in which an activity is divided into stages from initial motion through its completion, can be a helpful tool to both student and teacher. This written outline becomes a blueprint for what the student will do. It also helps to clarify the why. The motivation (although it may not be announced until after the performance) must be described and linked to what specifically is being done. The final “acted” version, including changes, can then be discussed by the group to see if what was presented did or did not show what it was designed to reveal. Suggestions for deletions, additions, and variations will help clarify both the motivation and its expression.

A student might, for example, opt to hang a curtain rod. All props are imaginary. In writing, the student presents a list of materials: ladder, hammer, nails, rod, hooks. He describes how he will climb up, how he will measure, hammer, hang. He must also be aware of the feelings behind the act (agitation? romance?) and any changes during the performance of the task (a banged thumb, perhaps).

Steps Four and Five : Improvisation

At the heart of this unit is improvisation, the deliberate flexing of emotional as well as mental and physical muscles in a controlled setting. Although exposing frustration, anger, and even hate may disturb the established sense of fun, growing to face and understand conflicts may avoid future disaster. At first, students can construct and flesh out scenes by varying or “improvising” characters and situations. A student “becomes” a person carrying a suitcase in a train station. How old is this person? How heavy is the suitcase?

Is he going toward or coming from the train? Does his face reveal sorrow? anticipation? fear? What does his walk reveal? The group must discover what the actor is trying to convey without words. Discussion following such an improvisation must be directed to include questions concerning what material the student chose to shape his character. It should also include constructive suggestions and variations. Then, leaving the story skeleton in tact, a different motivation must be revealed through a new improvisation by the same person.

Here, too, a student reaction paper (or two, including a brief description before and a personal statement after) can lead student and teacher to a new level of understanding. Another layer has been peeled away.

Once the group is assigned a skeleton situation, many of the “theatrical” elements of dramatic presentation can be improved through repeated attempts at improvisation. A group improvisation moves more smoothly when the pace of responses is quickened. So often, reading plays aloud in class fails because cues and reactions are missed. Improved timing is therefore an important consequence of repeated improvisation.

During the early stages of improvised adventure, the group should be divided into pairs. Of course, pairs should change in order to maintain the fluidity of the group as a whole. Ask students to improvise athletic activities without using words. They do not merely, for example, serve a tennis ball and return it. (Note: You may want them to role play a lone tennis player to get into character.) One must serve; the other must watch the ball and return it (or miss) with the total meshing of body movement, facial expression, and follow up in preparation for the next stroke. They must determine together the space, setting up imaginary or real court boundaries. Then, the questions begin. What moods are the players in? What weather conditions exist? Are the linesman impartial? Is the crowd hostile? All this is determined before the exercise in a prepared worksheet (an extension of what would be expected in role-playing) on which the pair has collaborated.

The next step might be to add the linesman. Now the three must plan and react as a group. Maybe spectators, or double partners or a human net can be gradually added to the scene. At each juncture, timing helps establish the “realness” of the tennis game. A missed cue must be a missed shot: a point for the other side. An over anxious response would also be a missed shot: another point. Bad placement or loss of balance?? Another point. The teacher-director, now in a neutral role, should probably become the silent and official scorekeeper. The tennis game is a fair metaphor for building complexities in improvisation. With each complication (My thanks to Dr. Whitaker for “Now let me complicate your life.”), the student is forced to make the adjustment quickly by thinking and reacting ALL THE TIME. Since there are no words at this stage, it is the physicalization alone that must be the embodiment of the message.

The physical continuity will hopefully add to a heightened awareness of the need for a spoken continuity as well. Games in which sentences are built word by word around a circle of people to a leader’s beat can be quite helpful. Here, they must each recall what was said and be ready to react quickly when a new word triggers their turn.

Improvisation, then, is an organic experience where skills are constantly being refined. In particular, students develop an increasing facility to meet changing or unknown stimuli with immediate responses. Ideally, improvisation leads to a blending; the student creates as he/she simultaneously identifies with the character as it evolves. Obviously, the teacher-director should never lose sight of the metamorphic and highly personal nature of improvisation; therefore, there must never be the question of success or failure.

Every improvisation, then, constitutes a play: there is a sequence of scenes; a fair length of time is devoted to the performance of the activity; and some resolution (or the decision that there is no resolution) is finally reached.

Step Six: Cuttings from Plays

As teachers of drama, we must be very familiar with the material we use. This is especially true of the plays we select. Cuttings—specific scenes or distillations of scenes from larger works—can be effective by themselves or as introductions to their parent works.

In this unit, I have selected material from readily available American contemporary drama. All three plays set up variations on the theme of parent vs. child. The skeleton plot is the same: one parent faces his or her own life through a psychological and/or emotional struggle with two very different children. Williams' *The Glass Menagerie*, Miller's *Death of a Salesman*, and Zindel's *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds* all have volatile rocky scenes our students can prepare that reveal, through physical as well as verbal interaction, the fears, the hopes, the pride of a variety of characters.

Williams' *The Glass Menagerie* is a memory play. The mother, Amanda, mourns the loss of a past that has not always been kind. Made perfect and safe by the distance time creates, these bittersweet images of her youth make Amanda's ability to deal with the present tenuous at best. She faces life as the abandoned wife-martyr; all she has is an unsuccessful career, a terribly shy and definitely crippled daughter, Laura, and a trapped son, Tom, who waits for his chance to escape the strangling role of family provider. Each lives for some unfulfilled dream. The tensions between the characters increase as they bump up against one another during brushes with reality.

Miller's *Death of a Salesman* also explores the question of broken dreams. Here, Willy Loman has lost his limited past success as a road salesman. Of his two sons, Biff, his favorite, has allowed himself to be crippled by the discovery that his father was less than perfect. His own life, much like Laura's, is becoming vestigial. He simply does not function in the presence of his father. Both Laura and Biff seem to exist and decline as a result of their parents' overwhelming devotion.

In this play, Willy and Biff suffer because time is confusing. The past is always rushing into the present, choking off any possibility for peace. As in *Glass Menagerie*, the question of the degree to which the children must be responsible for the parent is examined, if not answered.

Marigolds, in many ways, is a contemporary *Glass Menagerie*. The past plays a subtler role in dialogue and setting, but Beatrice is nonetheless the product of her own embellished dreams of the past and her get-rich-quick schemes (à la Willy) for the future. She is essentially housebound. Her two daughters represent both her burden and her last fleeting chance for something glorious. They are her marigolds. Their love/hate relationship is the most visually delineated of the three plays. Here, the mother has at least one tender and one extremely destructive scene with each child. Ruth, it should be noted, is damaged emotionally; she is the parallel to Laura.

In all three, then, the humanness and vulnerability of each parent is pitted against each one's mixture of stubborn pride and closely-held worn-out memories. These characters are then placed in a world of emotional and financial hardship; they are useless to all but their children. But the children feel the weight of being life-preservers and they fight back. Certainly there are parallels to be discovered in the lives of the youngsters who will work through these plays.

We shouldn't be afraid to take on some of the major acting roles when we begin. Very often, for a first reading, the authority roles we already have established in our classrooms can help the students find the responses they need to become involved with the characters they play. Take, for example, the scene in *The*

Glass Menagerie where Amanda returns home to face Laura after she discovers that Laura has been lying for weeks about attending business school. ⁵ The teacher can make Amanda's winded entrance and irregular breathing cry out with her despair, her shame, her anger, her fear of what will come next. The student tries to recall a moment that represents his or her own shame, or despair, or fear of not "measuring up" to what most assuredly becomes Amanda's broken dream. Improvisations designed by students can help them prepare for this particular cutting; it should not be a long leap for students into the role of Laura and, hopefully, into a sympathetic portrayal of Amanda.

It is no easy task to envision and work through this process by merely reading about it. It will take even longer to see any results in the classroom. The sequential activities build on each other, becoming more complex, but also, more significant. These steps can certainly be used independently, to spur interest or to provide alternatives in your classroom. There is so much material available on any particular facet of this unit. It should be stressed, however, that its major purpose is to give our students several avenues to self-awareness and to afford the teacher some new and useful insights into the emotional climates our students inhabit.

Drama is the closest literary form to life itself. Therefore, the teachers and students of dramatic art must engage in a dynamic process that reveals and examines interior aspects of the complicated lives we lead.

Notes

1. John Hodgson and Ernest Richards, *Improvisations: Discovery and Creativity in Drama* , pp. 11-17.
2. Barnfield, *Creative Drama in Schools* , pp. 44-45.
3. Constantine Stanislavsky, *An Actor Prepares*.
4. Viola Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theater* , p. 5.
5. Tennessee Williams, *The Glass Menagerie* , scene II, pp. 29-34.

Sample Activities

Step One: Warm ups

There are literally thousands of warm up exercises already written up and thousands of variations still to be discovered. Any activity that unatiffens both physically and mentally is a warm up. It also drastically alters the learning environment; students are doing something with their bodies at all times. This should be done every time you begin a drama session.

Objectives:

To heighten awareness of all parts of the body. To encourage physical rather than verbal description.

Sample Warm Ups:

Whatever the Weather

Explanation

The students become a forest of trees under your direction.

Procedure: Plant students in many patterns (circles, lines, etc.) but with lots of room to move. Remind them that their feet are roots; bodies are trunks; arms are major branches; hands, fingers, head, even hair are smaller twigs and leaves.

Assign different types of trees to different people (or let them describe themselves as particular trees in a writing assignment prior to this warm up). Now, the teacher-director (making appropriate sounds, of course, sets the forest in motion by changing the weather: a hurricane, a breeze, an early morning calm, a drenching rain, a sunshower.

This exercise may take several minutes at first. Shorter warm ups, involving only a couple of minutes, can be used after several sessions. Flexibility and relaxation are essential if more complicated activities are to succeed. Here are two such exercises:

Shake Out

Procedure:

Students are directed to shake each part of their bodies, including toes, noses, elbows, eyebrows, until they feel completely “shaken out.”

The Fat About the Thin

Procedure:

Students must make parts of their bodies as thin as possible while making other parts wide and fat.

Then, they must use their entire bodies to “become” a fat thing or a thin thing.

Step Two: Theatre Games

Once the juices are flowing, your students are ready to join forces. You don’t want to rush them into “thinking” too hard. Dialogue interfere at such an early stage because they are still battling with their bodies. You want them to enjoy experimenting with ways to discipline their movements. Coupled with warm ups, the games should be used in the first two or three classes. They can be re-introduced whenever the students need to “discover” some new movement or to simply relax during a tense session.

Sample Games:

Tug-O’-War

Procedure:

Using an imaginary rope and a real floor boundary, divide the group into two lines at each end of the rope. As they begin to pull, the teacher-director announces which side has the advantage, which is growing in strength,

losing ground, and so on. The group must follow both directions and the “feeling” the line shares.

Masks

Procedure:

Beginning with pairs of students, have partners each create a facial expression that matches a feeling (e.g. frustration). Sweeping both hands across the face, each clears his/hers face of the old expression and a “mask” of a new feeling appears as the hands are removed. The pairs discuss whether or not they successfully portrayed the chosen feelings. Suggestions and comparisons aid in establishing a usable repertoire of expressions for more complicated activities.

Step Three: Role Playing

Logically, the combination of the games (very physical) and personal observations leads to this next step: creating characterizations. Role play allows students to use imitation as a learning tool. They also begin to feel related to the characters they are attempting to make believable. Role playing should start when the teacher-director senses that the students are beginning to establish character types in their games. Step three should continue until many characters types have been tried by all. These exercises easily overlap into the realm of improvisation when they are expanded to include some kind of change during the scene.

Sample Role Plays:

Exact Change

Procedure:

A student has an imaginary basket of groceries. Objects must be placed on the conveyor belt (different sizes weights, and so on). The cash register is watched with trepidation. As each item is rung up, the student becomes more concerned with the final cost. Money is counted and recounted.

The final resolution is up to the actor. Suggestions include: stopping the checker for subtotals; trying to add items still on the belt; removing specific items after the total is reached; discovering with relief that there is enough money.

At the Library

Procedure:

The student must find the shelf that contains the titles on his/her list. Two or three volumes must be identified.

Step Four: Improvisation

Explanation:

I have isolated Steps four and five on paper where, in practice, they work together. Every improv that one student begins, others may join. At first, however, the teacher-director will want to take time to see if each member of the group can, after working through a warm up, begin to piece together an activity. Here, the link to role-play is very clear. “Exact Change” can easily become a group improv if any other participants and/or dialogue are added. Dialogue does become the major new element. Language (except for sounds) has, to this point, become secondary to movement. It is now time to reintegrate the two most obvious “real” activities—talking and moving—that our students do all the time. The “truth” of the improvisation comes from

the link between their real world and their created ones.

Improvisation should follow warm ups. Use the technique by itself or as a prelude to specific cuttings.

Sample Activities:

The Phone Call

Procedure:

A student starts a particular activity (washing dishes, polishing nails, scrubbing counters, whatever). The phone rings. The conversation overlaps with the continued activity. The student must show in what ways each part influences the other.

Packing

Procedure:

The student is packing a suit case in the privacy of his/her room. He or she is also talking aloud about the reason for the trip. Whatever feeling the monologue generates must also be expressed in the way the clothes are handled, packed, etc.

Note: Writing can help here. Allow some time after the improv for the student to recall his or her own similar (or dissimilar) experience and to describe the elements that were useful in the presentation.

Step Five: Group Improvisation

Explanation:

Now the real worlds must begin to mesh with the imaginary ones. Group improvisation is a practiced dramatic art. Although an improvisation by definition, occurs only once in a particular way, timing, concentration, expression, reaction, in fact, all dramatic techniques can be improved. Group improvisations also test the strength of your "ensemble". Students have been both participants and critics. Now they must put it all together without the structure (or the limitation) of a set script. This is a most useful technique if you have a specific cutting in mind and if you wish to set up aspects of conflict or characterization before the students get a taste of the material. Two or three sessions may be a good beginning, however, improvs should continue well into actual reading of the plays.

Samples Activities:

Dilemmas

Note: Here are two improvisations that follow the same pattern. A group of characters are faced with a conflict (a problem) that has two or more possible solutions. The job of the group is to narrow the choices to only one. Clearly, the teacher-director must be careful not to overload groups (if there are more than one) with too

many over-powering “deciders.” Try to balance the groups in the early stages.

A. Preparation: Students are themselves but the scene has changed. They all awaken from a deep sleep to discover that they are in a totally unfamiliar place. They simply cannot recall how they got there.

Dilemma: Does the group try to adjust or to escape?

B. Preparation: All the characters *except one* are deaf, or blind, or in some way handicapped (how convenient for introducing Laura’s limp:)

Dilemma: Does the group accept the “normal” one as its leader—or slave? Is he/she master—or outcast?

Note: Try to direct the decision making process into rather than apart from the action of the improvisation. Unconsciously, the students will be incorporating their own values, perhaps even their fears, in their decisions. A writing assignment discussing how they felt about their part in (or alienation from) the process should be very revealing.

Step Six: Cutting

Explanation:

Here, back-to-back cuttings are chosen because of the similar postures of the parents. Both Will and Beatrice are reacting to the loss of happier days. Their children become symbols of their present immobility, and therefore become targets for hostility. Students can work up both scenes in separate groups. They can change and rearrange lines as well as block action. They can then compare what similarities and differences they found in both motivation and presentation.

Sample Activities:

Death of a Salesman, Act One!

Explanation:

This scene involves all four members of the Loman family but is really a major confrontation between Willy and Biff. If the scene is to be performed without (or before) the rest of the play, it is necessary to explain some family history, including Willy’s suicide attempts. The scene runs from Biff’s angry “Screw the business world!” (so obviously the world his father loves best) through a defeated Willy’s “Give my best to Bill Oliver—he may remember me.” This line marks his exit. The student working on Willy’s role must find moments of pride, of fear, of happiness, of hopelessness in this one short passage. Biff can be viewed as a caged animal. At first he is deliberately trying to be supportive and to assume unwanted responsibilities; as he feels his own mounting tension, he fights against the pressures of his mother, his brother, and his father’s illusions.

Marigolds Act Two2

Explanation:

This scene involves Beatrice and her two daughters. All are eccentric. Tillie is excited and happy here. Ruth, too, is excited, but is still “Crazy Ruth.” This is Beatrice’s only moment of pure joy in the play—and it is expressed as a mother’s pride—the memory of her past lurks in the fuss she makes over her own appearance, over Tillie’s appearance, over the long-awaited social event (these parallel Willy’s return to glory through Biff’s possible business deal). The conflict emerges when a terrified Ruth challenges Beatrice’s authority. In order to protect herself, Ruth lashes out at her mothers’ secret past. At the end of the scene, Bea, like Willy, is both defeated and destroyed.

Procedure

for Cuttings: Distribute the Scripts and assign parts. Students should practice interruptions that do not interfere with word completions (ex: “I hate you. I—”/ “I hate you, too:”). The timing allows the effect of spontaneous interruption to occur without damaging the audience’s ability to hear all the dialogue. Discuss what is happening both emotionally and physically in the scene.

Block it.

Rehearse it.

Do it.

Here, the teacher-director must decide on the degree of structure to be imposed. I suggest you tell students a great deal about what these characters are like, especially if these are the first few cuttings you do. Also, students will feel less insecure if they know what they are working toward.

Notes

1. *Salesman* , pp. 61-75.
2. *Marigolds* , pp. 82-89.

ON THE ROAD TO THE MENAGERIE

Explanation:

Here is a series of independent activities follow the complete six-step sequence of the unit. Each exercise has been designed to lead up to the various conflicts expressed in or actions necessary to a particular cutting. (If we really know a play, we can reverse the steps in order to devise a logical order for the material.),

Step One: Warm Ups

Reach Up-Reach In

Objective:

To get every muscle flexing and moving.

Preparation:

Move all furniture to the far corners of the room.

Procedure:

1. Form a line with at least a foot between each student.
2. Direct students to reach to the sky (e.g. "You are a TALL OAK, reaching for the sunlight.")
3. After a moment, have them shrink down and fold into themselves (e.g. "You are a frightened turtle.")
4. Repeat steps 2 and 3 several times.
5. Stop and allow students to write about analogous emotional situations.

Results:

Conditioned bodies; awareness of space; a link

between feelings and physicalization.

Step Two: Theatre Games

Magnets

Objectives:

To establish a group process where strengths, weaknesses and differences are identified and incorporated into an "ensemble" structure.

To develop concentration skills in order to make students conscious of a need for "believability."

Preparation:

Clear the room. Remind yourself and your students that you are working on concentration skills:

Procedure:

1. Two students face each other from a distance of four feet. They are magnets, their outstretched arms are the poles

2. The leader (at first, the teacher-director) vocally directs them to move inward, reminding them that, with each step, their forces of attraction and repulsion begin to work. The leader keeps them from getting too close.

3. After several attraction/repulsion near-misses, the magnets lock, symbolized by entwined fingers.

4. **Variations:**

a. Make one magnet stronger, pulling on its partner who can only partially resist.

b. Introduce 1 or 2 people to pull on equal-strength magnets.

c. Introduce 1 or more students to act as metallic enticements that lure the magnets from their main forces.

d. Designate 1 student as a non-metallic object (but do not tell the magnets) and have them try to attract it.

Results:

1. Students will use similar movements to both attract and repel. Have them discuss how they felt about things they could or could not control.

2. Learn from what they do. Give them time to recall and write about an experience where they felt pulled toward or repelled by someone or something at one in the same time.

GLASS HOUSES

Objective:

To delineate invisible barriers that represent emotional limits that are difficult to define.

Preparation:

An open space.

Draw two 3' squares on the floor. The squares share one side.

Procedure:

1. Two students, standing in separate squares, are informed that walls of glass rise from the floor to the ceiling along the perimeter of each square.
2. Silently they investigate the three outer walls as if they did in fact exist.
3. Arriving at the shared wall, they must silently find ways to “reach” each other without crossing (and therefore breaking) the glass barrier.
4. Variations:
 - a. One student becomes a tease.
 - b. One student becomes ill, perhaps signalling for help.
 - c. One student becomes belligerent.
 - d. Dialogue begins (screamed or whispered) that revolves around “touching” or “joining.”

Results:

Through their experimentation, students can learn to express feelings of confinement and security. Again, what they bring to a particular setting or situation determines the interpretation.

Step Three: Role-Playing

Solo: All Who Enter Here

Objective:

To physicalize various emotions while performing a repeated action.

Note: This leads directly to Amanda’s entrance in the cutting.

Preparation:

A classroom door with a clear sightline for the entire group.

Procedure:

1. One person must prepare to open the door and enter the class. His state of mind must be physicalized in his movements.
2. The person closes the door, sustaining the mood as he approaches the group.
3. A simple line (e.g. “I have arrived at last.”) is incorporated and must, through its delivery, fit into the emotional climate.
4. Discussion: What did the student have to decide about his mood? What specific techniques did he/she use to express that mood in movement? How did the size or weight or sound of the door become a tool?
5. **Variation**

a. This can become a 2 character exercise by making a group member the focus of the mood. He/she must sense the feeling and answer the initial comment with a suitable response.

Results:

Here, the student begins to realize that his body movements and whatever his body touched send out messages to observers. He will learn to concentrate on what he is feeling in order to determine is that is indeed, what his actions reveal.

Pairs:

Oh Yes You Will!

Objectives:

To develop observation and concentration skills that lead to consistent characterizations. To explore motivations behind 2 characters in conflict by assuming both roles.

Preparation:

An open work space.

A list of suggested conflicts (e.g. dropping out of school; having a baby (parent or child), getting a parttime job (parent or child), smoking pot). Brief written descriptions of characters.

Procedure:

1. Each pair receives descriptions of a pair of characters (parent vs. child) that are “discussing “their conflict.
2. Students choose roles, knowing they will do the reverse later.
3. The pair decides on an action that will continue during the discussion; they also choose to resolve the question or to leave it open.
4. The scene begins. Students move from an opening with planned dialogue into a spontaneous one (the beginning of an improvisation). They must remain *in character* , both physically and verbally.
5. Students exchange roles and begin a new dialogue.

Results:

Students actors practice “types” that will aid in preparation for cold readings of plays. They will develop an ease in role-switching. Also, students can explore personal conflicts by tailoring roles they must play to parallel people they know well in their personal lives.

Note: Learn about what they feel. Allow time for a short narrative about why they felt the parents they created were or were not like their real parents. They can also explore what it felt like to defend their parents’ positions once they were forced into their roles.

Step Four: Improvisation

Broken Treasures / Broken Dreams

Objective:

To allow students to experience pleasure over and love for a treasured object and then experience the pain over the loss of that object.

Preparation:

Have an unbreakable dish or cup in the room.

Clear some space.

Procedure:

1. One student remembers a lost “special” object.
2. Handling the unbreakable piece provided by the director, the student must talk through a description while “feeling’ the possession.
3. At some point, the command, “Drop It:” is announced.
4. The object drops (as a book is slammed down behind the student).
5. Finally, the student must try to show his loss.
6. Variation
 - a. Include others in the process by allowing them to “share” the joy/or sorrow.
7. Writing assignment: Each student must compare an emotional (intangible) loss to the loss of a possession.

Result:

Rapid mood shifts help point up the need for quick reactions.

Step Five: Group Improvisation

Mother, Get Off My Back!

Explanation:

This is a highly demanding improv. Base a variation of Jack Preston Held's "Shadow Conscience" ¹ the exercise involves an excellent sense of timing coupled with careful listening skills. Physically, it is demanding as well; the proximity of the students involves control and trust.

Objective:

To understand how our actions are affected by the hidden voices of "conscience" or "super-ego" (the voice of the parent).

Preparation:

Clear a space. Rehearse whispering that is clear but *very quiet*. Allow students to lean into each other until "flinching" stops.

Procedure:

1. Place students in groups of four.
2. Direct 2 students to start a dialogue over breaking some rule (e.g. cutting class together, shoplifting as a team, making excuses so both can go out and stay out).
3. Place these students, seated and facing one another, in the middle of the space.
4. Direct the remaining two to stand behind each seated figure. They are invisible mothers (or fathers) whose presences are still strong. These parents lean into the seated figures in order to whisper freely without being seen or heard by the opposite pair.
5. As the dialogue begins, the voices whisper arguments in support of or against the comments of their "children". The voices endeavor to change the behavior of their seated partners. Remember the voices are *only* heard by the partners. Not even the audience participates.
6. Meanwhile, the seated figures must be listening to both sources of commentary. He/she may react to both. It gets frustrating.
7. The dialogue continues until one of the seated members gives in to a voice or makes a decision for the pair.
8. The parents and children switch roles.

Results:

Clearly, the two in the middle are torn between what they want to do and what they are being told to do. The

voice will become more adamant (or possibly surrender) if it senses a loss of or increase in control. The students through writing or discussion, can analyze whether or not the actor voices were more or less capable of altering their lives than the real parental voices that stalk our subconscious minds at all times.

Step Six: Cutting

Welcome to the Menagerie

Objectives

To introduce the conflicts in the characters of Amanda and Laura in Scene II of *The Glass Menagerie*²

To learn to quickly respond to changing moods. To develop basic blocking techniques

Preparation:

A cleared work space

A path from the door to the acting space

A table and chair at the center

A handkerchief for Amanda and a cardboard poster are necessary props.

Copies of the cutting (from the beginning of Scene II to the end of Amanda's long "Crust of humility" speech: "Of course some girls do marry.")

Procedure:

1. As teacher-director you must explain to the "ensemble" what this scene is all about. Explain the time frame (perhaps by reading Tom's opening monologue), Amanda's career and DAR meeting, Laura's glass collection, Rubicam's Business College.
2. Read with the chosen Amanda and Laura at the beginning, suggesting possible ways to approach the part.
3. Have Laura practice her limp; Amanda must practice "gentility" and gesticulation.
4. Let the pair work on (improvise) movement patterns for the scene.
5. Find lines that trigger major changes. Your students must physicalize these changes for their audience.
6. During these steps, discuss exactly what emotions are at work-and why your knowledge of the play can help your actors link their characters to their own feelings.
7. Rehearse the scene in front of the group. The teacher-director determines how often Then do it without stopping. Your students are "on."
8. Afterwards, the actors write about why they feel they did or did not become the characters of Amanda and Laura. Also, the group can discuss, in writing, whether or not this particular mother/daughter conflict has any parallels in their lives.

Results:

Hopefully, your selection of students/actors was a compatible meshing of types as well as abilities. With or without obvious similarities between actors and characters, students will find it necessary to explore their own emotional flexibility, They will also grow to understand why all the preliminary exercises have made the last step in the process not only easier, but more meaningful and enjoyable as well.

Notes

* This is the workbook used in a full-year drama course at Hillhouse. It includes chapters that include important theatrical terms in a narrative, specific projects for the student actor, as well as suggested activities and plays. If you plan to pursue drama for a presentation, try this book with your students.

1. Held, pp. 43-44.
2. Williams, pp. 29-34

Student Reading List

Miller, Arthur. *Death of a Salesman* . New York: Viking Press, 1949.

Tanner, Fran Everett. *Basic Drama Projects* . 2nd ed. Pocatello, Idaho: Clark Publishing Co., 1972.*

Williams, Tennessee. *The Glass Menagerie* . New York: New Directions, 1945.

Zindel, Paul. *The Effect of Gamma Rays on Man-in-the-Moon Marigolds* . New York: Bantam Books, 1973.

Teacher Bibliography

Barker, Clive. *Theatre Games* . New York: Drama Book Specialists 1977. An excellent source book.

Barnfield, Gabriel. *Creative Drama in Schools* . New York: Hart Publishing Co., 1968.

An interesting narrative about staging school productions.

Bentley, Eric. *The Life of the Drama* . New York: Atheneum, 1964.

This book inquires into the relationship between the dramatic process and real “human” drama.

Chaikin, Joseph. *The Presence of the Actor* . New York: Atheneum” 1972.

Chaikin loves to write about himself but you'll love reading about the Open Theatre and the strategies used there.

Dezseran, Louis John. *The Student Actor's Handbook* . Minnesota: Mayfield Publishing Co., 1975.

A super handbook that shows as well as explains types of activities.

Held, Jack Preston. *Improvisational Acting* . Belmont, California: Wadsworth Publishing Co., 1971.

A fine handbook of student activities including pages of sample worksheets.

Hodgson, John and Ernest Richards. *Improvisation : Discovery and Creativity in Drama* . London: Methuen and Co., 1972. This book approaches the notion of improvisation from every perspective. It should be read for both information and inspiration.

Owens, Fred. *Theatre Games* . Los Angeles: Diamond Heights Publishing Co., 1975.

Designed as a workbook for students, its main advantages are lots of suggestions and interesting worksheets.

Passoli, Robert. *A Book on the Open Theatre* . New York Bobbs-Merrill, 1970.

This book hooked me on improvisation and really inspired my process. The exercises are all clearly explained and annotated.

Snyder, Joan. *The Dynamics of Acting* . Skokie: National Textbook Co., 1972.

This book was specifically designed for a high school acting program. It offers suggestions for every level of performance. The narrative is also very clear and therefore a blessing for the novice teacher-director.

Spolin, Viola. *Improvisation for the Theater* . Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press, 1974. Here is the grandma of all books on Improvisation. It was the first and perhaps the broadest collection of exercises. You should have a copy on your shelf.

Stanislavsky, Constantine. *An Actor Prepares* . New York: Theater Arts, 1948.

This is "The Method" approach to character building. It works from the inside out, capturing feelings and finding how to link them to characters.

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