

Curriculum Units by Fellows of the Yale-New Haven Teachers Institute 1983 Volume V: Drama

## Acting Out or "As the School Turns"

Curriculum Unit 83.05.02 by Richard Canalori

Within any classroom, there is a tremendous amount of energy. Properly channeled, and developed through drama, this energy can be invaluable as a teaching tool. It can afford an outlet for students to express themselves, while at the same time helping students to better understand themselves and others.

Drama need not be performed for an audience, although this is the ultimate goal of this unit. Instead, drama can be as simple as the exchanges made on a daily basis by students within any classroom anywhere. These exchanges are both humorous and natural, but may be disruptive. This unit begins with the premise that through examination of student behavior, the spontaneous acting out that occurs can be the beginning of a study of drama. While not actually a soap opera, the interaction of students is anything but dull.

The unit is primarily for seventh and eighth grade students. The major objective is to introduce students to the idea of drama in their own lives; and to then transfer that idea to the works of others. The time frame for the unit will vary according to available time, but one marking period is recommended.

Initially, it will be necessary for students to feel comfortable with one another and with themselves. Very often students have few opportunities to be in a play or to speak in front of a class, and therefore there will be inhibitions to overcome. While reading aloud from a script may be worthwhile to a point, it does not begin to address the creativity and energy which is present during spontaneous conversations between classmates. It is this natural energy and spontaneity which this unit hopes to capture. Indeed the language used and types of interaction may offer insights into student behavior and problems, an area of study known as psychodrama.

Psycho-drama focuses on the use of the theatre to help students better understand themselves and the problems they face. It affords students the opportunity to discuss the question of identity.

Through improvisations based on everyday situations lines of communication will be opened. Students will gain a better understanding of themselves and their relationships with others. Students must first know who they are before they can hope to portray others. Developing a positive self image through values clarification activities (where difficult choices must be made) will help students deal with problems they must face in everyday life, and will assist in the enjoyment and understanding of theatre.

The unit is divided into three main sections. Section I focuses on improvisational games and activities. The activities described in this section-serve two main functions. First, they are non-threatening and help to

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alleviate any anxiety students may feel about performing in front of their classmates. Second, they establish the fact that the things children say, and the way in which they are said, are important. Section I concludes with a shared improvisational writing activity. This activity assists in the transition to the written script by discussing the strengths and weaknesses of each scene developed.

Section II focuses on the study of existing drama. Three one act plays are discussed first and finally a full length drama. The activities in this section serve to identify the major elements of a play. The works discussed in this section all deal with problems faced by children. While written in styles very different from one another, they offer an opportunity to discuss values. The question of why certain choices were made by a particular character in a play may assist students in choices they must make in their own lives.

The final section of the unit builds upon the skills introduced in Section I and Section II and uses these skills to help write original scripts. Types of plays, the major components of a script, and the reasons for including certain scenes will all be discussed. While not a necessary outcome, the possible production of one or more original works is certainly a desired outcome.

## Section I

The unit begins with the game "To Tell the Truth." This game allows students to share ideas with one another. It is necessary to open lines of communication and to alleviate anxiety. Both of these objectives can be met through this activity. In the game, three students are asked to tell a story about themselves. Only one of the three stories told is actually true. The students meet beforehand to decide which of them will speak the truth. Their task is to mislead the class into believing that one of the false stories is the truth. The class, after listening to the stories, is allowed to ask questions. Finally the class votes on which story they feel is true. The truth is then revealed. Students should be asked to give their reasons for choosing a particular story. What qualities seemed to make one story more believable than the others?

In a variation of this game, each student tells the same story. The story being told happened to only one of the three students. That student has given the details of the incident to the other two contestants before they begin. Each tries to convince the class that the incident being described actually happened to them. Once again, the class votes for the person they feel in telling the truth. Tone of voice, details, and sincerity should be discussed following the presentations. Why did students choose correctly or incorrectly? How did they judge?

The second activity within this section deals with the language of the students. Within any classroom it is soon obvious that a great deal of the vocabulary used by the students is indeed unique. "To Tell the Truth" allowed students to share personal stories with one another. In this activity students are asked to share phrases used in conversations with friends. Not only is what children say important, but equally important is the choice of vocabulary. Later in developing written drama the vocabulary compiled in this activity will be incorporated in the scripts. Recently, a high school in Raleigh, North Carolina developed a test based on the street language used by the students at the school. The test was administered to employees of the McGraw-Hill Co., who prepared standardized tests, and none of the eight employees who took the test scored higher than a "C." The differences in language are worth exploring.

Students, in this activity, are asked to describe current phrases used by students in talking with one another.

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These metaphors, or figures of speech, are usually analogies which take a literal meaning of one object and transfer it to another to suggest a likeness. The term "Home boy" for example is currently used to describe a best friend. Certainly the relationship to the home and the security of a best friend are analogous. As each metaphorical phrase is given it should be listed on the blackboard. The meaning of each term should be stated as well. Children should be questioned as to the origin of each phrase. What is their significance?

Having now compiled a current vocabulary, the students will find that the use of improvisation will help to answer these questions. Improvisation is, in simple terms, a play without a script. While later in this unit, various scripts will be studied, it is for the time being better to improvise. Improvisation does not depend on memorizing lines and it is spontaneous. Opportunities for discussion and insight into the areas of importance for students are readily available through this technique. At first, topics for improvisation should be related to the current vocabulary developed in the previous activity. Three or four members of the class are asked to act out the origin or meaning of a particular phrase. The objective of each group in this activity is to use the phrase within a skit to show its meaning. The participants may agree to play themselves in these performances or they may decide to assume the role of someone else and change the setting. Stories or scripts may later be compiled in Section III to further highlight the student vocabulary and to serve as a theme for student writing within this unit.

From this point the teacher will introduce the idea of personal conflict. The following may serve as an example. Imagine one student, Rick, who is angry with his friend, Jerry, for using his bike without asking. The situation escalates until Jerry and Rick along with other students are involved in a locker room fight. Could the situation have been avoided? A series of steps can be used to help frame the scene and to show the progression in action which will be necessary later in the development of student situations. The following diagram is a part of the unit *Choices*: A *Unit on Conflict and Nuclear War* printed by the National Education Association in 1982.

#### (figure available in print form)

While assisting in setting up improvisational scenes, the steps point out the need to think before acting as a means of curbing escalation and seeking alternative choices. The terms negotiation and compromise may be introduced. What reactions were made at each step causing the situation to escalate to its eventual outcome? As a homework activity, students should be asked to describe a scene they would like to see performed. The use of steps will assist in helping to show the nature of the conflict and its eventual outcome. Once completed the writer will choose class members to play each role. No dialogue is necessary at this point although the best of these improvisations may later be used as a part of the student's original work in Section III. At that time the student vocabulary developed earlier in this section will also be incorporated.

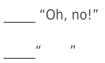
The final activity in Section I takes the unit in a different direction. Until now, the idea of a script has been non-existent. The emphasis has been on sharing experiences and on creating a positive atmosphere. Areas of concern for students have been discussed as well as student behavior and language. Students may feel that although they now feel comfortable in the area of improvisation they are in no way ready to write a script. To alleviate fears and to move into the study of existing drama the following group writing activity is proposed.

This activity is, in essence, another form of improvisation. The teacher may later find other uses for this activity, but initially its objectives are to have fun, begin to write, and to add new episodes in our continuing soap opera. Have the class select four characters at random. These characters should be familiar to everyone in the class. They may be fictional super heroes, famous characters in history, or members of the school community. Once having determined the characters, the class is divided into groups of four. Each group is told

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that they will, as a group, be developing a script to be performed before the other groups. What follows is a bit confusing at first, but will become much more familiar with practice. The results are worth the effort.

Each student is given a sheet of paper. On each sheet is written the following opening line.



Each student on their own sheet of paper then selects the Character from the four agreed upon by the class to say the opening line. It is possible for each of the four students to select a different character for the opening since all of this is done without the other members of the group being aware of what is being written. After writing the opening line of dialogue, the student aids a second line and the name of the new speaker. The following is a sample of what one student might have written.

Wonder Woman "Oh, no!"

Mickey Mouse "Yes, we must close Disney World."

Each group will now have four entirely different beginnings from which to expand. On a pass signal, after about one minute, the group members each pass their sheet to the person on their right. The group member receiving the new sheet now adds a third line of dialogue as well as the name of the new speaker. The pass signal is repeated and the scripts are once again passed to the right. The process continues for about fifteen minutes with the four scripts for each group continuing to pass from one group member to another. The group is writing four completely different scenes at the same time. Each scene is being written by the entire group and is completely independent of the other three scripts. Once a sufficient number of passes have been made the teacher should allow a definite number of final passes necessary for students to conclude each scene.

After the scenes are complete, group members are asked to read individually the four scripts and to grade each script from one to four with four being the highest. They should record the scores on the reverse side of the sheet and pass the scripts around until each member of the group has read and graded the four scripts. Students should not look at the grades others have recorded until they have determined the score they feel is fair. This is to avoid being influenced by others in the group. The script with the highest total score will then be performed by the group after a sufficient amount of time to rehearse. The group will decide who will play each role.

Looking at the scenes developed by each group offers the opportunity to discuss the components of a good scene. Why was one particular piece chosen for performance over the others? What were the strengths and weaknesses of each selection? Also, what question did each of the scripts address—what was the conflict? Was the conflict resolved? This type of an activity may be repeated with a different opening line and a different set of characters. It serves three very important functions. First, students are writing and do not feel threatened. Second, the finished products offer examples to study and from which to expand. Finally, it's fun.

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## **Section II**

In this section, the class will focus on the study of existing drama. Before beginning to write original plays that deal with student interests, they will first have to look at the work of others. While the group writing activity and the use of steps, both in Section I, may have given some ideas about structure, the class now needs to identify the major components of a play. The class will be introduced to various types of plays and will determine the questions each addresses. The sequence of events used by the various authors will help students determine the importance of each scene in the play and the progression from one point to another toward an eventual resolution.

Availability of plays will determine exactly what plays are studied. Any play dealing with childhood problems and/or social issues would be helpful. For this unit, I have selected three one-act plays for study as well as one full length drama. The choices are in no way fixed and the teacher should feel free to substitute as desired. What is important, now that interest has been sparked, is that this interest be kindled through the study of existing drama. The three one-act plays all deal with parent-child relationships. Each is contained in the Washington Square Press edition of the book 15 American One-Act Plays , which was edited by Paul Kozelka. The three plays are Red Carnations by Glenn Hughes, Feathertop adapted by Maurice Valency from a story by Nathaniel Hawthorne, and The Undercurrent by Fay Ehlert. The authors' points of view are different and so are their intentions. The first play is a comedy, the second a satiric fantasy, and the third a serious drama.

As each selection is read, the teacher should point out each of the underlined components. The plays open with a description of the *setting* and an indication of the *mood*. Where does the story take place and what *tone* is established before the play begins? How is this achieved? The list of characters may include the way in which they are dressed or important physical characteristics. These notes can give the reader a great deal of insight into how a character thinks and the way in which they will act in a particular situation.

Once the audience is interested in the characters and the setting has been established, a *dramatic situation* is introduced. In *Red Carnations*, a 1925 play, we find that the action takes place in a city park. A boy has arranged to meet a girl he met earlier at a costume party. Both were wearing masks. The meeting will take place on a park bench and she will only know him if he is wearing a red carnation. Many *complications* or *conflicts* develop. A man is also at the park bench, and he too is wearing a red carnation. The man says he is waiting for a girl to meet him. Both the man and the boy have the same name. The girl is late in her arrival and this gives the author an opportunity to develop the scene.

When the girl finally arrives she stands off to the side. Neither the man nor the boy is sure of whom she is there to meet. *Suspense* is an important ingredient in any play. The man convinces the boy to approach the girl and to determine who, in fact, she is there to meet. This suspense leads to the *climax*. The boy does approach her and learns that she is the girl from the party that he was to meet. The man we learn has carried out this deceptive plan to protect the girl, his daughter. The man soon realizes he knows the boy's family and the three characters leave the park arm in arm on their way to dinner. The *resolution* of the play is complete. There is no doubt that the future will be a happy one. This, as we will see, is not always the case.

In the second play, *Feathertop*, we see a scarecrow come to life through the magical powers of a witch. The newly created young man is sent forth with the advice, "Look wise, ask no questions, and tell no lies." By doing this, Feathertop is told he can hold his own with anyone. His head is clear of corruption and he can change the world. The author in setting the stage with this *dramatic situation* has a *motive*. The young man is unspoiled. Why has this type of character been developed? What does the author want us to learn in this

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satiric fantasy? Feathertop is soon surprised at how quickly people want to tell him of the corruption of others. He is treated with a great deal of respect and honor by the people he meets simply because he says very little and is willing to listen to the problems of others.

As the play progresses, Feathertop falls in love with the daughter of a corrupt judge. While the judge insists the daughter marry Feathertop, she is in love with another. Feathertop knows she would be happier with her true love and return to the witch without having changed the world. The *resolution* of the play is not entirely unhappy, however. In allowing the young girl to marry her true love, Feathertop has, according to the author, done more good in a short time than many do in their entire lives. While this is not necessarily true, the teacher may wish to introduce the author's *point of view*. What was he trying to say about people and about life? Fantasy allows the author to discuss serious questions in terms everyone can understand. Various levels of understanding may be introduced at this time, and comparisons may be made to other forms of literature in which this technique is used such as the novel *Animal Farm*.

The final one-act play, *The Undercurrent*, is a serious drama dealing with the problem of parental discipline. Written by a Chicago social worker, the play addresses the question of how to discipline children. The author stresses the importance of good communication between family members and the need for parents to be consistent in their ideas concerning the way in which they will raise their children. Students, in reading this play, should be encouraged to discuss the *point of view* of each character. Why is the father so strict? Is this a form of love? Should the mother be more vocal? Should Anne, the teenage daughter, be more understanding? Does the social worker have any right to become involved in this family problem?

In the play, Anne has run away because of her father's very strict form of discipline. Her mother does not want Anne's father to know that she has run away for fear he will become violent. She instead tells him that Anne is working for the social worker at her home. On a weekly visit to her home an angry neighbor tells the father that Anne was arrested for loitering. As the father is about to strike Anne, the social worker and Anne's mother create a story to cover up the truth. The social worker at the end of this play takes Anne to live with her in the country realizing that the father will not change. Anne's mother, while unhappy, realizes this is the best solution.

This play offers several topics for discussion and for study. What is good discipline? How much freedom should students have? Can you love your children and be strict at the same time? How important is it for members of the family to communicate and how is this communication established? *The Undercurrent* is a wonderful play in beginning to discuss these very important issues. The questions asked here may very well be transferred to the writing of one-act plays done in Section III of this unit. Each student, if writing this play should be asked if the *resolution* they would use to end the play would have been the same. If not, how would it have differed?

Having read a variety of one-act plays, the class will now read and analyze a full length drama, *A Raisin in the Sun* by Lorraine Hansberry. As with *The Undercurrent*, this too is a serious drama. Unlike *The Undercurrent*, however, which dealt only with parental discipline, *A Raisin in the Sun* looks at a great many social issues and themes. Among these topics discussed are poverty, crime, education, religion, race prejudice, pride, family responsibility, and love. The way in which these themes are introduced give the play a more complex dramatic structure than the one-act plays read previously.

Set in Chicago's Southside sometime after World War II, the play takes place over a two week period. Unlike the plays studied earlier, this is a play in three acts. The main plot is soon evident. The Younger family, about whom this play is written is about to receive a ten thousand dollar insurance check. Mama, whose husband's death is the reason for the check, and Walter, her son, disagree on what to do with the money. Walter would

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like to go into business. Mama wants to buy a house. Ruth, Walter's wife, Beneatha, his sister and Travis, Walter's son, are the other players. The interaction between each member of the family has great value in helping students deal with family problems they too may face.

Unlike one-act plays, several sub-plots develop within the play. One sub-plot involves Beneatha. She is dating two men. One, George, is very wealthy and would have her leave her worries for the finer things in life. The other boyfriend is an African nationalist, Asagai, who would have Beneatha move with him to Africa. How this question is introduced and if it is eventually resolved should be traced.

Another sub-plot involves the fact that the house Mama buys in Act II-Scene I is in a predominantly white neighborhood. When Lindner, a white businessman, is sent to buy the house back from the Youngers in Act II-Scene 3 Walter throws him out. Later in Act III, Walter calls him back to accept the offer. Once again, Walter changes his mind and throws him out. Why this progression? The questions of race prejudice as well as family pride are necessary to discuss; so too is the way in which themes such as prejudice, the need for education, and the question of religion are introduced. A vital activity would be to take each scene in the play and to decide why the author included it in the play. What is the purpose of each scene? In the lesson plans which conclude this unit, this activity and others relating to the study of *A Raisin in the Sun* will be provided.

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Play Title

Writer

Type of Play (Circle one) Comedy Fantasy Serious Drama

Setting (Include year, location, scenery notes)

Mood (The predominant emotion or feeling in the play; may include type of music or lighting to be used)

Characters (Include name, age, physical characteristics, type of dress, feelings about other characters, and any other helpful information such as type of personality or attitude)

Exposition—What is going to happen in the play? What is the cause of each event that happens and what is its effect? What is the eventual outcome of the play? (paragraph form)

Using the above paragraphs show the scenes your play will use to go from the initial conflict to the resolution. Additional notes should be written on a separate sheet of paper as to how you will go from one step to the next.

### (figure available in print form)

Satisfied that preparations have been made through the formulation of a scenario, the writer is ready to begin. In the first step, the student, using the plan developed, should describe the setting and indicate the mood of the play through lighting notes, music to be played, and a short exposition. The characters should be described as to age, physical features, and type of dress. The scenario may include other information such as type of language used or favorite expressions, but this is not necessary for the audience in understanding the story. This additional information will become evident through the dialogue.

Once the setting has been described and the audience has the information it will need to understand the play,

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the dialogue should begin. Like a short story, a one-act play should concentrate on essential elements in understanding the story. The action presented in such plays is usually continuous and the plot relatively simple. Unlike full length plays there in not enough time to develop a complex plot. The one-act play is simply a "slice of life" and very straightforward. The dialogue should be written with the idea of telling the story in a clear manner and using language appropriate for each character.

The steps outlined in the scenario should be consulted in planning the major exchanges which will take place. The writer must determine beforehand what characters will be necessary to complete each exchange and how these characters will get on and off the stage. The words EXIT and ENTER should be used as needed. In addition, stage directions and notes on the way lines should be delivered must be given in parentheses after the name of the speaker and before the dialogue. It is important that the writer quickly introduce the characters, get the audience involved in the situation, and establish the mood of the play. Careful planning is the key to accomplishing these objectives.

As the play progresses, the audience should become aware of the problem or complication and the resulting suspense caused by this problem. Various alternatives and possible solutions should be offered within the dialogue. There are many choices which are possible when we are confronted with a problem and each of these choices has consequences which will differ. The writer should provide the audience with the various alternatives without revealing which choice is made and the result of that decision.

Reading the scripts aloud throughout the writing process will help to clear up awkward or unclear exchanges. It is also an excellent technique to use in showing students how they can help one another both in the writing process and in content. As we are dealing with social questions and attitudes, the situations presented in the various scripts are questions faced by a great number of students. Exchanges between students will help in understanding why the writer chose a particular point of view. There is a great need to discuss common problems as a means of coping with issues which all of the students face in their daily lives.

Once completed, the plays should once again be shared with one another. Discussions between members of the class may lead to final revisions. It also gives needed recognition to the students for the plays they have written and deserve to share. A title page should be written with the name of the play followed by the words, "A One-Act Play by." Additional notes on the play's format should be compiled through the study of other works. The final copy should be typed and bound if possible.

Many of the student plays will be suitable for performance. The teacher, together with the class, should make plans to present their work to other classes and parents. While not a necessary outcome of this unit, the presentation of one-act plays written by the students would be magnificent both for the students and for the audience. Too often students are spectators in education rather than active participants. Education is not a passive activity, and drama offers the opportunity to create and to share. It allows us to explore the questions of life which confront us all. Through psycho-drama, students are encouraged to discuss their concerns in a non-threatening environment. Drama may well be the "Guiding Light" in helping "The Young and the Restless."

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## SAMPLE ACTIVITIES

I have chosen to present three one-day activities related to the study of *A Raisin in the Sun* . The activities would be helpful in analyzing the structure of the play and in better understanding its characters.

#### Sample Activity #1

Each exchange between characters in *A Raisin in the Sun* is necessary for the plot to develop. In Act 1—Scene 1 there are several exchanges which help to set the stage for the action that follows.

Objective The students will determine and list the ways in which author is able to get characters on and off the stage at each moment in Act 1—Scene 1. Second, the students will note the reasons why it is important for certain characters to be present or absent during a particular exchange.

#### **Procedure**

- 1. Read through Act 1—Scene 1 a minimum of twice.
- 2. Answer the following questions:

What character is on stage at all times during this scene?

How does the author use the bathroom to add or remove characters within the scene?

What purpose does the discussion over fifty cents for Travis play in this scene?

List the major conflicts introduced in this scene. When is each problem introduced and by whom?

3. Using the information from the answers to the above questions, outline the major exchanges in the scene and the reason each is important.

## Sample Activity #2

A great deal of the action in *A Raisin in the Sun* occurs outside of the play and is never seen by the audience. Willie Harris, for example, plays a very important role in the play and yet he is never shown.

Objective Students, using information implied within the play, will describe a conversation between a character from the cast and a person or group of people discussed but never shown. In completing this activity, students will stress the importance of such unseen action in helping to form a complete picture of each character by including personality characteristics which may not be present in what we see on stage.

Procedure Each student is asked to describe a meeting between one of the following pairs of

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#### characters:

- 1. Walter and Willie
- 2. Walter and his boss
- 3. Mama and the realtor
- 4. Beneatha and her teacher
- 5. Travis and a friend

This assignment may be completed in story form or using dialogue. Once completed, the students should be asked if this assignment changed the way they felt about a particular character. If so, how?

## Sample Activity #3

Many of the conflicts introduced in *A Raisin in the Sun* are left unresolved. Other problems are only partially resolved. Also, new questions arise at the conclusion of the play. As very little is settled at the play's end, what happens in the future is an important consideration and the topic of this activity.

Objective Students will review many of the conflicts presented within the play and give predictions for the future based on available information and the personality of each character.

Procedure Complete the following chart. What will be the outcome of each conflict? Will it be resolved or will it continue to exist? If it is resolved, what will be the resolution? If it is not resolved, does the question go away, become more of a problem, or change in some other way? Discuss your answers with others in the class. How are your predictions different from those of your classmates. Upon what information is your prediction based?

Complete the following chart.

				Future Reason for			
Characters	Conflict	Prediction	Prediction				
Mama and Beneatha	importance of						
		religion					
Beneatha and Walter	importance of						
		education					
Walter and his boss	over job pay						
		and responsibility	,				
		of being to work					
		on time					
Beneatha and herself deciding between							

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George, Asagri

or neither Walter and Mama over decision making power within the family Walter and Bobo what to do in the future to escape poverty Ruth and Walter the loss of communication between the two The Younger family prejudice and their new neighbors

## **Student Bibliography**

Hansberry, Lorraine. A Raisin in the Sun. New York: Signet Books, 1966.

A serious drama dealing with the problems of a black family in Chicago after World War II.

Kozelka, Paul (editor). 15 American One-Act Plays. New York: Washington Square Press, 1961.

Good examples of storytelling in play form. Includes plays on a wide variety of subjects.

# **Teacher Bibliography**

Courtney, Richard and Schattner, Gertrude. *Drama in Therapy Volume I*. New York: Drama Book Specialists, 1974.

Offers insight into the use of drama as an important tool in therapy. Focuses on the areas of psycho-drama and the therapeutic method. Volume II deals with this topic for adults.

Durland, Frances. Creative Dramatics for Children. Ohio: Antioch Press, 1952.

A manual for teachers to use in working with beginning actors. Useful sections include notes of directing and rehearsal problems.

Johnstone, Keith. *Improvisation and the Theatre*. New York: Theatre Arts, 1979.

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Valuable for teachers as a tool for helping children begin to relax.

Spolin, Viola. Improvisation for the Theatre. Evanston: Northwestern University Press, 1972.

A wide variety of improvisational games and ideas. Very useful sequence of activities to assist in the teaching of drama.

Walker, Pamela. Seven Steps to Creative Children's Drama. New York: Hill and Wang, 1957.

Helpful in the production of a play. Offers activities for children to use in the sharpening of concentration skills and the use of the five senses.

Ward, Winifred. Theatre for Children. Kentucky: Children's Theatre Press, 1950.

Especially helpful in discussing the major components for the writing and structure of a play.

National Education Association. Washington D.C. Choices: a unit on conflict and the nuclear war. 1982.

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