
IMPROVISATION FOR THE THEATER

A HANDBOOK OF TEACHING AND DIRECTING TECHNIQUES

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ORIGINATOR OF THEATER GAMES



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To Neva Boyd, Ed Spolin, The Young Actors Company,
and my sons Paul and Bill Sills

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ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

I wish to thank Neva L. Boyd for the inspiration she gave me in the field of creative group play. A pioneer in her field, she founded the Recreational Training School at Chicago's Hull House, and from 1927 until her retirement in 1941 she served as a sociologist on the faculty of Northwestern University. From 1924 to 1927 as her student at her house, I received from her an extraordinary training in the use of games, story-telling, folk dance, and dramatics as tools for stimulating creative expression in both children and adults, through self-discovery and personal experiencing. The effects of her inspiration never left me for a single day.

Subsequently, three years as teacher and supervisor of creative dramatics on the WPA Recreational Project in Chicago—where most of the students had little or no background in theater or teaching—provided the opportunity for my first direct experiments in teaching drama, from which developed a non-verbal, non-psychological approach. This period of growth was most challenging, as I struggled to equip the participating men and women with adequate knowledge and technique to sustain them as teacher-directors in their neighborhood work.

I am also grateful for the insights I have had, at sporadic times throughout my life, into the works of Constantin Stanislavsky.

To my son, Paul Sills—who with David Shepherd founded the first professional improvisational theater in the country, the Compass (1956–1958)—I owe the first use of my material, and I am grateful for his assistance in the writing of the first manuscript a dozen or so years ago and his experimental use of it at the University of Bristol while a Fulbright Scholar. From 1959 to 1964 he applied aspects of this system with actors at

— ACKNOWLEDGMENTS —

the Second City in Chicago. The final revision of this book could only take place after I came to Chicago, observed his work with his company, and sensed his vision of where it could go.

I wish to thank all my California students who nagged me over the years; and my assistant Robert Martin, who was with me during the eleven years of the Young Actors Company in Hollywood where most of the system was developed; and Edward Spolin, whose special genius for set design framed the Young Actors in glory.

My grateful thanks to Helene Koon of Los Angeles, who helped me through the second rewrite of the manuscript, and all my dear Chicago friends and students who helped in every way they could during the arduous task of completing the third and final draft of the manuscript.

Viola Spolin

VIOLA SPOLIN'S PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION

The stimulus to write this handbook can be traced back beyond the author's early work as drama supervisor on the Chicago WPA Recreational Project to childhood memories of delightful spontaneous "operas" that were performed at family gatherings. Here, her uncles and aunts would "dress up" and through song and dialogue poke fun at various members of the family and their trials and predicaments with language and jobs as newcomers to America. Later, during her student days with Neva Boyd, her brothers, sisters, and friends would gather weekly to play charades (used as WORD GAME in this book), literally tearing the house apart from kitchen to living room as pot covers became breastplates for Cleopatra and her handmaidens and drapes from the window became a cloak for Satan.

Using the game structure as a basis for theater training, as a means to free the child and the so-called amateur from mechanical, stilted stage behavior, she wrote an article on her observations. Working primarily with children and neighborhood adults at a settlement-house theater, she was also stimulated by the response of school audiences to her small troupe of child improvisers. In an effort to show how the improvising game worked, her troupe asked the audience for suggestions which the players then made into scene improvisations. A writer friend who was asked to evaluate the article she wrote about these activities exclaimed, "This isn't an article — it's an outline for a book!"

The idea for a book was put aside until 1945, when, after moving to California and establishing the Young Actors Company in Hollywood, the author again began experimenting with theater techniques with boys and

— VIOLA SPOLIN'S PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION —

girls. The creative group work and game principles learned from Neva Boyd continued to be applied to the theater situation in both workshops and rehearsal of plays. Gradually the word "player" was introduced to replace "actor" and "physicalizing" to replace "feeling." At this time, the problem-solving and point-of-concentration approach was added to the game structure.

The training continued to develop the form that had appeared earlier in the Chicago Experimental Theater—scene improvisation—although the primary goal remained that of training lay actors and children within the formal theater. The players created scenes themselves without benefit of an outside playwright or examples by the teacher-director while they were being freed to receive the stage conventions. Using the uncomplicated guiding structure labeled Where, Who, and What, they were able to put the full range of spontaneity to work as they created scene after scene of fresh material. Involved with the structure and concentrating upon solving a different problem in each exercise, they gradually shed their mechanical behaviorisms, emoting, etc., and they entered into the stage reality freely and naturally, skilled in improvisational techniques and prepared to act difficult roles in written plays.

Although the material has been drafted for publication for many years, its final form was reached after the author observed how improvisation works professionally—at the Second City in Chicago, the improvisational theater of her son, director Paul Sills. His further development of the form in use professionally brought new discoveries and the introduction of many newly invented exercises in her Chicago workshops. The manuscript underwent total revision to include the new material and to present the clearest use of the form for professional as well as community and children's theater.

The handbook is divided into three parts. The first is concerned with the theory and foundations for teaching and directing theater, the second with an outline of workshop exercises, and the third with special comments on children in the theater and directing the formal play for the community theater.

— VIOLA SPOLIN'S PREFACE TO THE FIRST EDITION —

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The handbook is equally valuable for professionals, lay actors, and children. For the school and community center it offers a detailed workshop program. For directors of community and professional theater it provides insight into their actors' problems and techniques for solving them. To the aspiring actor or director it brings an awareness of the inherent problems which lie before him.

1963

VIOLA SPOLIN'S PREFACE TO THE SECOND EDITION

Over my past twenty years of living with the games/exercises, of working to keep them constantly alive and exciting, several of their key ideas have emerged as essential, and I have tried to stress them as much as possible in this new edition.¹ (1) The importance of group response, in which players see themselves as an organic part of the whole, becoming one body through which all are directly involved in the outcome of the playing. Being part of the whole generates trust and frees the player for playing, the many then acting as one. (2) The need for players to see themselves and others not as students or teachers but as fellow players, playing on terms of peerage, no matter what their individual ability. Eliminating the roles of teacher and student helps players get beyond the need for approval or disapproval, which distracts them from experiencing themselves and solving the problem. There is no right or wrong way to solve a problem; there is only one way—the seeking—in which one learns by going through the process itself. (3) The need for players to get out of the head and into the space, free of the restricted response of established behavior, which inhibits spontaneity, and to focus on the actual field—SPACE—upon which the playing (energy exchange) takes place between players. Getting out of the head and into the space strengthens the player's ability to perceive and sense the new with the full body. My years of working with the games have shown that this living, organic, non-authoritarian climate can inform the

1. Some of the thinking included in this preface was developed while compiling my *Theater Game File* (Evanston, Ill.: Northwestern University Press, 1989).

learning process and, in fact, is the only way in which artistic and intuitive freedom can grow.

When I started this work forty or more years ago, one of my most difficult problems was to capture the non-verbal essence of my approach to drama in words. Words can easily become labels, dead and useless. The word or the subject matter should not take the place of the process; it is the process of solving a problem that releases intelligence, talent, and genius. Just as in my teaching practice I change the focus when a game isn't working, so here, in this edition, I've changed some terms in order to reflect new understanding and workshop practice. Most significantly, I now use "focus" instead of "point of concentration" (although it was not possible to change this term throughout the book). Point of concentration suggests a set object. It can be a blinder, like a magnifying glass held over one object or an absent-minded professor falling off his chair while concentrating on a thought. "Focus," on the other hand, suggests to me a moving energy, like a ball in a constant state of movement, the players all acutely conscious of everything going on around them while keeping their eye on the ball. Similarly, whereas "relationship" is static and implies role playing, "relation" is a moving force—seeing, hearing, perceiving. "Motivation," a commonly used term, I have replaced with "integration." Motivation is limited and subjective; it cuts the players off from ongoing stage life, and it implies that you have to have a reason for everything. I also now even further de-emphasize mime and conscious muscular memory, and I no longer recommend visualization or memorization of invisible objects/props. Instead of visualization and memorization, which are in the head (the intellect, the known) and not in the space (the intuitive, the unknown), to make the invisible visible I refer to "space" substance or objects. Space objects are projections of the unknown, the inner self, into the visible world. When one player throws an invisible ball (space object) to another, the activity makes visible the player's sharing and connecting with the player who catches the invisible ball. Here there is no time lag between facing a problem and solving it. There is no time for thinking about playing—the player plays. I use "X-area" to supplement "intuition." "Intuition" is an over-used term which means many things to countless other schools. "X-area" em-

phasizes the undefined and perhaps undefinable nature of intuition, the hidden well-springs, the unlabeled, beyond intellect, mind, or memory, from which the artist (the player) draws inspiration.

The most significant change in the games themselves is the addition of "Follow the Follower" (p. 62), a variation on the "Mirror" game in which no one initiates and all reflect. This game quiets the mind and frees players to enter a time, a space, a moment intertwined with one another in a non-physical, non-verbal, non-analytical, non-judgmental way. Played daily, this exercise can bring miraculous unity and harmony to a group of players; it is a thread woven through the entire fabric of the theater game process.

The changes in this new edition will, I hope, enable players to be present to the moment they are present to, to directly see and be seen, touch and be touched, know and be known. The games, I hope, will awaken the natural talent within everyone. I would like to thank Carol Sills for her assistance in preparing this edition.

THEORY AND FOUNDATION

CHAPTER I
CREATIVE EXPERIENCE

Everyone can act. Everyone can improvise. Anyone who wishes to can play in the theater and learn to become "stageworthy."

We learn through experience and experiencing, and no one teaches anyone anything. This is as true for the infant moving from kicking to crawling to walking as it is for the scientist with equations.

If the environment permits it, anyone can learn whatever he or she chooses to learn; and if the individual permits it, the environment will teach everything it has to teach. "Talent" or "lack of talent" have little to do with it.

We must reconsider what is meant by "talent." It is highly possible that what is called talented behavior is simply a greater individual capacity for experiencing. From this point of view, it is in the increasing of the individual capacity for experiencing that the untold potentiality of a personality can be evoked.

Experiencing is penetration into the environment, total organic involvement with it. This means involvement on all levels: intellectual, physical, and intuitive. Of the three, the intuitive, most vital to the learning situation, is neglected.

Intuition is often thought to be an endowment or a mystical force enjoyed by the gifted alone. Yet all of us have known moments when the right answer "just came" or we did "exactly the right thing without thinking." Sometimes at such moments, usually precipitated by crises, danger, or shock, the "average" person has been known to transcend the limitation of the familiar, courageously enter the area of the unknown, and release momentary genius within. When response to experience takes place at

this intuitive level, when a person functions beyond a constricted intellectual plane, intelligence is freed.

The intuitive can only respond in immediacy—right now. It comes bearing its gifts in the moment of spontaneity, the moment when we are freed to relate and act, involving ourselves in the moving, changing world around us.

Through spontaneity we are re-formed into ourselves. It creates an explosion that for the moment frees us from handed-down frames of reference, memory choked with old facts and information and undigested theories and techniques of other people's findings. Spontaneity is the moment of personal freedom when we are faced with a reality and see it, explore it and act accordingly. In this reality the bits and pieces of ourselves function as an organic whole. It is the time of discovery, of experiencing, of creative expression.

Acting can be taught to the "average" as well as the "talented" if the teaching process is oriented towards making the theater techniques so intuitive that they become the students' own. A way is needed to get to intuitive knowledge. It requires an environment in which experiencing can take place, a person free to experience, and an activity that brings about spontaneity.

The full text is a charted course of such activity. The present chapter attempts to help both teacher and student find personal freedom so far as the theater is concerned. Chapter II is intended to show the teacher how to establish an environment in which the intuitive can emerge and experiencing take place: then teacher and student can embark together upon an inspiring, creative experience.

SEVEN ASPECTS OF SPONTANEITY

Games

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 devel-

oped at the very moment a person is having all the fun and excitement playing a game has to offer—this is the exact time one is truly open to receive them.

Ingenuity and inventiveness appear to meet any crises the game presents, for it is understood during playing that a player is free to reach the game's objective in any style chosen. As long as we abide by the rules of the game, we may swing, stand on our heads, or fly through the air. In fact, any unusual or extraordinary way of playing is loved and applauded by fellow players.

This makes the form useful not only in formal theater but especially so for actors interested in learning scene improvisation, and it is equally valuable in exposing newcomers to the theater experience, whether adult or child. All the techniques, conventions, etc. that the student-actors have come to find are given to them through playing theater games (acting exercises).

Playing a game is psychologically different in degree but not in kind from dramatic acting. The ability to create a situation imaginatively and to play a role in it is a tremendous experience, a sort of vacation from one's everyday self and the routine of everyday living. We observe that this psychological freedom creates a condition in which *strain* and *conflict* are dissolved and potentialities are released in the spontaneous effort to meet the demands of the situation.¹

Any game worth playing is highly social and has a problem that needs solving within it—an objective point in which each individual must become involved, whether it be to reach a goal or to flip a chip into a glass. There must be group agreement on the rules of the game and group interaction moving towards the objective if the game is to be played.

Players grow agile and alert, ready and eager for any unusual play as they respond to the many random happenings simultaneously. The personal capacity to involve one's self in the problem of the game and the effort put forth to handle the multiple stimuli the game provokes determine the extent of this growth.

1. Neva L. Boyd, *Play, a Unique Discipline*.

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Growth will occur without difficulty in students because the very games they play will aid them. The objective upon which the player must constantly focus and towards which every action must be directed provokes spontaneity. In this spontaneity, personal freedom is released, and the total person, physically, intellectually, and intuitively, is awakened. This causes enough excitement for the student to transcend himself or herself—he or she is freed to go out into the environment, to explore, adventure, and face all dangers unafraid.

The energy released to solve the problem, being restricted by the rules of the game and bound by group decision, creates an explosion—or spontaneity—and as is the nature of explosions, everything is torn apart, rearranged, unblocked. The ear alerts the feet, and the eye throws the ball.

Every part of the person functions together as a working unit, one small organic whole within the larger organic whole of the agreed environment which is the game structure. Out of this integrated experience, then, a total self in a total environment, comes a support and thus trust which allows the individual to open up and develop any skills that may be needed for the communication within the game. Furthermore, the acceptance of all the imposed limitations creates the playing, out of which the game appears, or as in the theater, the scene.²

With no outside authority imposing itself upon the players, telling them what to do, when to do it, and how to do it, each player freely chooses self-discipline by accepting the *rules of the game* ("it's more fun that way") and enters into the group decisions with enthusiasm and trust. With no one to please or appease, the player can then focus full energy directly on the problem and learn what he or she has come to learn.

Approval/Disapproval

The first step towards playing is feeling personal freedom. Before we can play (experience), we must be free to do so. It is necessary to become part of the world around us and make it real by touching it, seeing it, feeling it,

2. In education, the release of intelligence—learning!

tasting it, and smelling it—direct contact with the environment is what we seek. It must be investigated, questioned, accepted or rejected. The personal freedom to do so leads us to experiencing and thus to self-awareness (self-identity) and self-expression. The hunger for self-identity and self-expression, while basic to all of us, is also necessary for the theater expression.

Very few of us are able to make this direct contact with our selves. Our simplest move out into the environment is interrupted by our need for favorable comment or interpretation by established authority. We either fear that we will not get approval, or we accept outside comment and interpretation unquestionably. In a culture where approval/disapproval has become the predominant regulator of effort and position, and often the substitute for love, our personal freedoms are dissipated.

Abandoned to the whims of others, we must wander daily through the wish to be loved and the fear of rejection before we can be productive. Categorized “good” or “bad” from birth (a “good” baby does not cry too much) we become so enmeshed with the tenuous threads of approval/disapproval that we are creatively paralyzed. We see with others’ eyes and smell with others’ noses.

Having thus to look to others to tell us where we are, who we are, and what is happening results in a serious (almost total) loss of personal experiencing. We lose the ability to be organically involved in a problem, and in a disconnected way, we function with only parts of our total selves. We do not know our own substance, and in the attempt to live through (or avoid living through) the eyes of others, self-identity is obscured, our bodies become misshapen, natural grace is gone, and learning is affected. Both the individual and the art form are distorted and deprived, and insight is lost to us.

Trying to save ourselves from attack, we build a mighty fortress and are timid, or we fight each time we venture forth. Some in striving with approval/disapproval develop egocentricity and exhibitionism; some give up and simply go along. Others, like Elsa in the fairy tale, are forever knocking on windows, jingling their chain of bells, and wailing, “Who am I?” In all cases, contact with the environment is distorted. Self-discovery and other

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exploratory traits tend to become atrophied. Trying to be "good" and avoiding "bad" or being "bad" because one can't be "good" develops into a way of life for those needing approval/disapproval from authority—and the investigation and solving of problems becomes of secondary importance.

Approval/disapproval grows out of authoritarianism that has changed its face over the years from that of the parent to the teacher and ultimately the whole social structure (mate, employer, family, neighbors, etc.).

The language and attitudes of authoritarianism must be constantly scourged if the total personality is to emerge as a working unit. All words which shut doors, have emotional content or implication, attack the student-actor's personality, or keep a student slavishly dependent on a teacher's judgment are to be avoided. Since most of us were brought up by the approval/disapproval method, constant self-surveillance is necessary on the part of the teacher-director to eradicate it in himself or herself so that it will not enter the teacher-student relationship.

The expectancy of judgment prevents free relationships within the acting workshops. Moreover, the teacher cannot truly judge good or bad for another, for *there is no absolutely right or wrong way to solve a problem*: a teacher of wide past experience may know a hundred ways to solve a particular problem, and a student may turn up with the hundred and first.³ This is particularly true in the arts.

Judging on the part of the teacher-director limits our own experiencing as well as students', for in judging, we keep ourselves from a fresh moment of experience and rarely go beyond what we already know. This limits us to the use of rote-teaching, of formulas and other standard concepts which prescribe student behavior.

Authoritarianism is more difficult to recognize in approval than in disapproval—particularly when a student begs for approval, to get a sense of himself or herself. Although a teacher's approval usually indicates progress has been made, it remains progress in the teacher's terms, not the student's. In wishing to avoid approving we must therefore be careful not to detach

3. See "Evaluation," pp. 273-75.

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ourselves in such a way that the student feels lost, feels that nothing is being learned, etc.

True personal freedom and self-expression can flower only in an atmosphere where attitudes permit equality between student and teacher and the dependencies of teacher for student and student for teacher are done away with. The problems within the *subject matter* will teach both of them.

Accepting simultaneously a student's right to equality in approaching a problem and a lack of experience puts a burden on the teacher. This way of teaching at first seems more difficult, for the teacher must often sit out the discoveries of students without interpreting or forcing conclusions on them. Yet it can be more rewarding for the teacher, because when student-actors have truly learned through playing, the quality of performance will be high indeed!

The problem-solving games and exercises in this handbook will help clear the air of authoritarianism, and as the training continues, it should disappear. With an awakening sense of self, authoritarianism drops away. There is no need for the "status" given by approval/disapproval as all (teacher as well as student) struggle for personal insights—with intuitive awareness comes certainty.

The shift away from the teacher as absolute authority does not always take place immediately. Attitudes are years in building, and all of us are afraid to let go of them. Never losing sight of the fact that *the needs of the theater are the real master*, the teacher will be cued, for the teacher too must accept the *rules of the game*. Then the role of guide will be easily found by the teacher-director, who after all knows the theater technically and artistically, and whose experiences are needed in leading the group.

Group Expression

A healthy group relationship demands a number of individuals working interdependently to complete a given project with full individual participation and personal contribution. If one person dominates, the other

members have little growth or pleasure in the activity; a true group relationship does not exist.

Theater is an artistic group relationship demanding the talents and energy of many people—from the first thought of a play or scene to the last echo of applause. Without this interaction there is no place for the single actor, for without group functioning, who would one play for, what materials would one use, and what effects could one produce? A student must learn that “how to act,” like the game, is inextricably bound up with every other person in the complexity of the art form. Improvisational theater requires very close group relationships because it is from group agreement and group playing that material evolves for scenes and plays.

For students first entering the theater experience, working closely with a group gives a great security on one hand and becomes a threat on the other. Since participation in a theater activity is confused by many with exhibitionism (and therefore with the fear of exposure), individuals fancy themselves “one against many,” who must single-handedly brave a malevolent-eyed people sitting in judgment. The student, then, bent on proving self-worth, constantly watches and judges himself or herself and moves nowhere.

When working with a group, however, playing and experiencing things together, the student-actors integrate and find themselves within the whole activity. The differences as well as the similarities within the group are accepted. A group should never be used to induce conformity but, as in a game, should be a spur to action.

The cue for the teacher-director is basically simple: we must see that each student is participating freely at every moment. The challenge to the teacher or leader is to activate each student in the group while respecting each one's immediate capacity for participation. Though the gifted student will always seem to have more to give, yet if a student is participating to the limit of his or her powers and using abilities to the fullest extent, he or she must be respected, no matter how minute the contribution. The student cannot always do what the teacher hopes, but as progress is made, capacities will enlarge. Work with students where they are, not where you think they should be.

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Group participation and agreement remove all the imposed tensions and exhaustions of the competitiveness and open the way for harmony. A highly competitive atmosphere creates artificial tensions, and when competition replaces participation, compulsive action is the result. Sharp competition connotes to even the youngest the idea that he or she has to be better than someone else. When a player feels this, energy is spent on this alone; a player becomes anxious and driven, and fellow players become a threat. Should competition be mistaken for a teaching tool, the whole meaning of playing and games is distorted. Playing allows a person to respond with his or her "total organism within a total environment." Imposed competition makes this harmony impossible, for it destroys the basic nature of playing by occluding self and by separating player from player.

When competition and comparisons run high within an activity, there is an immediate effect on students which shows in their behavior. They fight for status by tearing other people down or develop defensive attitudes, giving detailed "reasons" for the simplest action, bragging, or blaming others for their own deeds. Those who find it impossible to cope with imposed tension turn to apathy and boredom for release. Almost all show signs of fatigue.

Contest and extension, on the other hand, is an organic part of every group activity and gives both tension and release in such a way as to keep the player intact while playing. It is the growing excitement as each problem is solved and more challenging ones appear. Fellow players are needed and welcomed. It can become a process for greater penetration into the environment.

With mastery of each and every problem we move out into larger vistas, for once a problem is solved, it dissolves like cotton candy. When we master crawling, we stand, and when we stand, we walk. This everlasting appearing and dissolving of phenomena develops a greater and greater sight (perceiving) in us with each new set of circumstances. (See all transformation exercises.)

If we are to keep playing, then, natural extension must exist wherein each individual strives to solve consecutively more complicated problems.

These can be solved then, not at the expense of another person and not with the terrible personal emotional loss that comes with compulsive behavior, but by working harmoniously together with others to enhance the group effort or project. It is only when the scale of values has taken competition as the battle cry that danger ensues: the end-result—success—becomes more important than process.

The use of energy in excess of a problem is very evident today. While it is true that some people working on compulsive energies do make successes, they have for the most part lost sight of the pleasure in the activity and are dissatisfied with their achievement. It stands to reason that if we direct all our efforts towards reaching a goal, we stand in grave danger of losing everything on which we have based our daily activities. For when a goal is superimposed on an activity instead of evolving out of it, we often feel cheated when we reach it.

When the goal appears easily and naturally and comes from growth rather than forcing, the end-result, performance or whatever, will be no different from the process that achieved the result. If we are trained only for success, then to gain it we must necessarily use everyone and everything for this end; we may cheat, lie, crawl, betray, or give up all social life to achieve success. How much more certain would knowledge be if it came from and out of the excitement of learning itself? How many human values will be lost and how much will our art forms be deprived if we seek only success?

Therefore, in diverting competitiveness to group endeavor, remembering that process comes before end-result, we free the student-actors to trust the scheme and help them solve the problems of the activity. Both the gifted student who would have success even under high tensions and the student who has little chance to succeed under pressure show a great creative release and the artistic standards within the workshop rise higher when free, healthy energy moves unfettered into the theater activity. Since the acting problems are organic, all are deepened and enriched by each successive experience.

Audience

The role of the audience must become a concrete part of theater training. For the most part, it is sadly ignored. Time and thought are given to the place of the actor, set designer, director, technician, house manager, etc., but the large group without whom their efforts would be for nothing is rarely given the least consideration. The audience is regarded either as a cluster of Peeping Toms to be tolerated by actors and directors or as a many-headed monster sitting in judgment.

The phrase "forget the audience" is a mechanism used by many directors as a means of helping the student-actor to relax on stage. But this attitude probably created the fourth wall. The actor must no more forget the audience than lines, props, or fellow actors!

The audience is the most revered member of the theater. Without an audience there is no theater. Every technique learned by the actor, every curtain and flat on the stage, every careful analysis by the director, every coordinated scene, is for the enjoyment of the audience. They are our guests, fellow players, and the last spoke in the wheel which can then begin to roll. They make the performance meaningful.

When there is understanding of the role of the audience, complete release and freedom come to the player. Exhibitionism withers away when the student-actor begins to see members of the audience not as judges or censors or even as delighted friends but as a group with whom an experience is being shared. When the audience is understood to be an organic part of the theater experience, the student-actor is immediately given a host's sense of responsibility toward them which has in it no nervous tension. The fourth wall disappears, and the lonely looker-in becomes part of the game, part of the experience, and is welcome! This relationship cannot be instilled at dress rehearsal or in a last minute lecture but must, like all other workshop problems, be handled from the very first acting workshop.

If there is agreement that all those involved in the theater should have personal freedom to experience, this must include the audience—each member of the audience must have a personal experience, not artificial

stimulation, while viewing a play. If they are to be part of this group agreement, they cannot be thought of as a single mass to be pulled hither and yon by the nose, nor should they have to live someone else's life story (even for one hour) nor identify with the actors and play out tired, handed-down emotions through them. They are separate individuals watching the skills of players (and playwrights), and it is for each and every one of them that the players (and playwrights) must use these skills to create the magical world of a theater reality. This should be a world where every human predicament, riddle, or vision can be explored, a world of magic where rabbits can be pulled out of a hat when needed and even the devil can be conjured up and talked to.

The problems of present-day theater are only now being formulated into questions. When our theater training can enable the future playwrights, directors, and actors to think through the role of the audience as individuals and as part of the process called theater, each one with a right to a thoughtful and personal experience, is it not possible that a whole new form of theater presentation will emerge? Already fine professional improvising theaters have evolved directly from this way of working, delighting audiences night after night with fresh theatrical experiences.

Theater Techniques

Theater techniques are far from sacred. Styles in theater change radically with the passing of years, for *the techniques of the theater are the techniques of communicating*. The actuality of the communication is far more important than the method used. Methods alter to meet the needs of time and place.

When a theater technique or stage convention is regarded as a ritual and the reason for its inclusion in the list of actors' skills is lost, it is useless. An artificial barrier is set up when techniques are separated from direct experiencing. No one separates batting a ball from the game itself.

Techniques are not mechanical devices—a neat little bag of tricks, each neatly labeled, to be pulled out by the actor when necessary. When the form of an art becomes static, these isolated “techniques” presumed to

make the form are taught and adhered to strictly. Growth of both individual and form suffer thereby, for unless the student is unusually intuitive, such rigidity in teaching, because it neglects inner development, is invariably reflected in performance.

When the actor knows "in my bones" there are many ways to do and say one thing, techniques will come (as they must) from the total self. For it is by direct, dynamic awareness of an acting experience that experiencing and techniques are spontaneously wedded, freeing the student for the flowing, endless pattern of stage behavior. Theater games do this.

Carrying the Learning Process into Daily Life

The artist must always know where he or she is, perceive and be open to receive the phenomenal world in order to create reality on stage. Since theater training does not have practice hours in the home (it is strongly recommended that no scripts be taken home to memorize, even when rehearsing a formal play), what we seek must be brought to the student-actor within the workshop.⁴ This must be done in such a way that it is absorbed, and carried out again (inside the self) to daily living.

Because of the nature of the acting problems, it is imperative to sharpen one's whole sensory equipment, shake loose and free one's self of all preconceptions, interpretations, and assumptions (if one is to solve the problem) so as to be able to make direct and fresh contact with the created environment and the objects and the people within it. When this is learned inside the theater world, it simultaneously produces recognition, direct and fresh contact with the outside world as well. This, then, broadens the student-actors' ability to involve themselves with their phenomenal world and more personally to experience it. Thus *experiencing* is the only actual homework and, once begun, like ripples on water is endless and penetrating in its variations.

When students see people and the way they behave when together, see the color of the sky, hear the sounds in the air, feel the ground beneath

⁴ See pp. 316-18.

them and the wind on their faces, they get a wider view of their personal world and development in the theater is quickened. The world provides the material for the theater, and artistic growth develops hand-in-hand with one's recognition of it and one's self within it.

Physicalization

The term "physicalization" as used in this book describes the means by which material is presented to the student on a physical, non-verbal level as opposed to an intellectual or psychological approach. "Physicalization" provides the student with a personal concrete experience (which can be grasped) on which further development depends; and it gives the teacher and student a working vocabulary necessary to an objective relationship.

Our first concern with students is to encourage freedom of physical expression, because the physical and sensory relationship with the art form opens the door for insight. Why this is so is hard to say, but be certain that it is so. It keeps the actor in an evolving world of direct perception—an open self in relation to the surrounding world.

Reality as far as we know can only be physical, in that it is received and communicated through the sensory equipment. Through physical relationships all life springs, whether it be a spark of fire from a flint, the roar of the surf hitting the beach, or a child born of man and woman. The physical is the known, and through it we may find our way to the unknown, the intuitive, and perhaps beyond to the human spirit itself.

In any art form we seek the experience of going beyond what we already know. Many of us hear the stirring of the new, and it is the artist who must midwife the new reality that we (the audience) eagerly await. It is sight into this reality that inspires and regenerates us. This is the role of the artist, to give sight. What is believed cannot be our concern, for these matters are of intimate nature, private to the actor and not for public viewing. Nor need we be concerned with an actor's feelings. We are interested only in direct physical communication. Feelings, personal to each of us, are of no use in theater. When energy is absorbed in the physical object, there is no time for "feeling" any more than a quarterback running down the field can be

concerned with his clothes or whether he is universally admired. If this seems harsh, be assured that insisting upon this objective (physical) relationship with the art form brings clearer sight and greater vitality to the student-actors. For the energy bound up in fear of exposure is freed (no longer secretive) as the student intuitively realizes no one is peeping at his or her private life or cares where he or she buried the body.

A player can dissect, analyze, intellectualize, or develop a valuable case history for a part, but if one is unable to assimilate it and communicate it physically, it is useless within the theater form. It neither frees the feet nor brings the fire of inspiration to the eyes of those in the audience. The theater is not a clinic, nor should it be a place to gather statistics. The artist must draw upon and express a world that is physical but that transcends objects—more than accurate observation and information, more than the physical object itself, more than the eye can see. We must all find the tools for this expression. “Physicalization” is such a tool.

When a player learns he or she can communicate directly to the audience only through the physical language of the stage, it alerts the whole organism.⁵ Players lend themselves to the scheme and let this physical expression carry them wherever it will. In improvisational theater, for instance, where few or no props, costumes or set pieces are used, players learn that a stage reality must have space, texture, depth and substance—in short, physical reality. It is creating this reality out of nothing, so to speak, that makes it possible for the actor to take a first step into the beyond. For the formal theater where sets and props are used, dungeon walls are but painted canvas and treasure chests empty boxes. Here, too, the player can create the theater reality only by making it physical. Whether with prop, costume, or strong emotion the actor can only *show* us.

5. “Direct communication” as used in this text refers to a moment of mutual perceiving.

individual student-audience member is asked to be open for communication. The player makes the communication or does not, the audience sees it or does not. This, then, continues to clear up the whole problem of How; for members of the audience cannot then decide How in their terms (interpretation) the player should have made the communication.

Pre-planning How constitutes the use of old material even if that material is but five minutes old. Pre-planned work on stage is the result of a rehearsal even if that rehearsal was but a few seconds of mental visualization. Any group of student-actors laughingly give up their hold on How when they realize that if they want to rehearse and perform they should be with a group doing a show instead of a workshop. For the unskilled, whose rehearsal can at best bring only anxious performance, a great sense of relief is evident when they realize all they have to do is play the game.

Real performance, however, opens players up for deeper experiences. When this moment arrives, it is apparent to everyone. It is the moment of the total organism working at its fullest capacity—right now! Like a flash of fire, real performance is all-consuming, burning away all the subjective needs of the player and creating a moment of great excitement throughout the theater. When this occurs, spontaneous applause will come from the workshop members. (See "Performance," p. 365).

Pre-planning is necessary only to the extent that the problems should have a structure. The structure is the Where, Who, and What plus the focus. It is the field upon which the game is played that is pre-planned. How the game will go can be known only when the players are out on the field.

REMINDERS AND POINTERS

The following list of reminders and pointers for both teacher (or group leader) and student rightfully should be weighed after the exercises have been used. However, a quick glance at them now will alert everyone, and the list should be reviewed while a group is working through the exercises.

1. Do not rush student-actors. Some students particularly need to feel

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unhurried. When necessary, quietly coach. "Take your time." "We all have lots of time." "We are with you."

2. Interpretation and assumption keep the player from direct communication. This is why we say *show*, don't *tell*. Telling is verbally or in some other indirect way indicating what one is doing. This then puts the work upon the audience or the fellow actor, and the student learns nothing. Showing means direct contact and direct communication. It does not mean passively pointing to something.

3. Note that many exercises have subtle variations. This is important, and they should be understood, for each variation is solving a very different problem for the student. As you go through the work, you as teacher-director will find that you may make your own variations to solve problems.

4. Repeat problems at different points in the work, to see how student-actors handle early work differently. Also, this is important when relationships with the environment become fuzzy and detail is lost.

5. How we do something is the *process of doing* (right now!). Pre-planning How makes process impossible and so becomes resistance to the focus of the exercise, and no "explosion" or spontaneity can take place, making any change or alterations in the student-actor impossible. True improvisation re-shapes and alters the student-actor through the act of improvising itself. Penetration into the focus, connection, and a live relation with fellow players result in a change, alteration, or new understanding for one or the other or both. In time, during the solving of the acting problem the student becomes aware of being acted upon and of acting, thereby creating process and change within his or her stage life. The intuition gained remains with the player in everyday life, for whenever a circuit is opened for anyone, so to speak, it is usable everywhere.

6. Without exception, all exercises are over the moment the problem is solved. This may happen in one minute or in twenty, depending on the growing skills of students in playing. The solving of the problem is the scene's life force. Continuing a scene after the problem is solved is *cerebration* instead of *process*.

7. Try always to keep an environment in the workshop where all can

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find their own nature (including the teacher or group leader) without imposition. Growth is natural to everyone. Be certain that no one is blocked off in the workshops by an inflexible method of treatment.

8. A group of individuals who act, agree, and share together create strength and release knowledge surpassing the contribution of any single member. This includes the teacher and group leader.

9. The energy released in solving the problem, flowing through the Where, Who, and What, forms the scene.

10. If during workshop sessions students become restless and static in their work, it is a danger sign. Refreshment and a new focus is needed. End the problem immediately and use some simple warm-up (object) exercise or game. Skip around the handbook and use anything that will keep up the vitality level of the group. Just be careful not to use any advanced exercises until the group is ready for them. Be certain that Orientation and Where exercises are given students in the beginning work, however. This is as true for the professional company as it is for the lay actor and newcomer to the theater.

11. Become familiar with the many game books useful in this work.

12. Remember that a lecture will never accomplish what an experience will for student-actors.

13. Be flexible. Alter your plans on a moment's notice if it is advisable to do so, for when the foundation upon which this work is based is understood and you know your role as teacher, you can find an appropriate theater game and/or games to meet an immediate problem.

14. Just as you watch your students for restlessness and fatigue, so you must watch yourself. If following workshops you find yourself drained and exhausted, go carefully over your work and see what you are doing to create this problem. A fresh experience can only create refreshment.

15. While a team is working on stage, the teacher-director must observe audience reaction as well as the players' work. The audience (including yourself) should be checked for interest levels and restlessness; the actors must interrelate, communicate physically, and be seen and heard as they solve the acting problem. When an audience is restless, uninterested, the actors are responsible for this.

16. The heart of improvisation is transformation.

17. Avoid giving examples. While they are sometimes helpful, the reverse is more often true, for the student is bound to give back what has already been experienced.

18. If the environment in the workshop is joyous and free of authoritarianism, everyone will play and become as open as young children.

19. The teacher-director must be careful to always stay with the focus. The tendency to discuss character, scene, etc. critically and psychologically is often difficult to stop. The focus keeps both the teacher and the student from wandering too far afield.

"Did he solve the problem?"

"He was good."

"But did he solve the problem?"

20. No outside device is to be used during playing. All stage action must come out of what is actually happening on stage. If actors invent an outside device to create change this is avoidance of relation and the problem itself.

21. Actors in improvisational theater, like the dancer, musician, or athlete, require constant workshops to keep alert and agile and to find new material.

22. Act, don't react. This includes the teacher and group leader as well. To react is protective and constitutes withdrawal from the environment. Since we are seeking to reach out, a player must act upon environment, which in turn acts upon player, catalytic action thus creating interaction that makes process and change (building of a scene) possible. This is a most important point of view for members of the workshop to have.

23. If the student-actors are to develop their own material for scene improvisations, group selection and agreement on the simplest objects in the beginning work are essential to developing this group skill.

24. The response of an audience is spontaneous (even when the response is boredom), and with rare exception (as when large numbers of friends and relatives are present), can be considered just. If the actors realize that they do not face a "put-on" response, they can then play with the audience as they would with another team. An actor can be reassured,

"If they were a bad audience, then, of course, they deserve to be punished."

25. Watch for excessive activity in early sessions of workshop; discourage all performing, all cleverness. Students with previous training, natural leadership, or special talent will often ignore the focus just as the fearful one will resist it. Keep everyone's attention focused on the problem at all times. This discipline will bring the timid ones to fuller awareness and channel the freer ones towards greater personal development.

26. Let all scenes develop out of the agreed stage environment. The players must help each other "make do" with what is at hand if they are to truly improvise. As in games, the student-actors can play only by giving complete attention to the environment.

27. Discipline imposed from the outside (emotional tug-of-war for position) and not growing out of involvement with the problem produces inhibited or rebellious action. On the other hand discipline freely chosen for the sake of the activity becomes responsible action, creative action; it takes imagination and dedication to be self-disciplined. When the dynamics are understood and not superimposed, rules are abided by, and it is more fun that way.

28. Keep the fine line between emoting and perceiving always clear within the workshop by insisting upon concise physical expression (physicalizing) and not vague or stale feeling.

29. The sensory equipment of students is developed with every tool at our command, not to train for mechanical accuracy in observation, but for strengthening perception towards their expanding world.

30. Unless needed to solve a specific problem in a play, remembered experiences (recalls) are avoided as the group works for immediate (right now) spontaneous ones. Every individual has enough muscular memory and stored-away experience that can be used in a present-time situation without deliberately abstracting it from the total organism.

31. If student and teacher are freed from ritual and authoritarianism and allowed to share this freeing of their creativity, no one need dissect and examine their emotions. They will know that there are many ways of express-

ing something—that cups, for instance, are held differently by different people and different groups.

32. By helping to free the student-actor for the learning process and by inspiring communication in the theater with dedication and passion, it will be found that the average person will not fail to respond to the art form.

33. Warm-ups should be used before, during, and after workshop sessions when necessary. They are brief acting exercises that refresh the student as well as catering to particular needs as seen by the teacher-director during each session.

34. Stage life comes to the player by giving life to the object. Giving life to the object prevents the player from mirroring the self.

35. Invention is not the same as spontaneity. A person may be most inventive without being spontaneous. The explosion does not take place when invention is merely cerebral and therefore only a part or abstraction of our total selves.

36. The teacher-director must learn to know when the student-actor is actually experiencing, or little will be gained by the acting problems. Ask the player!

37. Never use the advanced acting exercises as a bribe. Wait until students are ready to receive them.

38. Allow students to find their own material.

39. Self-discovery is the foundation of this way of working.

40. Do not be impatient. Don't take over. Never force a nascent quality into false maturity through imitation or intellectualization. Every step is essential for growth. A teacher can only estimate growth, for each individual is a personal "center of development."

41. The more blocked, the more opinionated the student, the longer the process. The more blocked and opinionated the teacher or group leader, the longer the process.

42. Tread gently. Keep all doors open for future growth. This includes the teacher and leader of the group as well.

43. Do not be concerned if a student seems to be straying far from your idea of what should be happening to him or to her. When students trust

the scheme and have pleasure in what they are doing, they will give up the bonds that keep them from release and full response.

44. Everyone who involves himself or herself and responds with his or her total organism to an art form usually gives back what is commonly called talented and creative behavior. When players respond joyously, effortlessly, you will know that the theater is, then, in their very bones.

45. Always work to achieve the universal selection, the essence understood by all who see it.

46. Ad-libbing and wordiness during the solving of problems constitutes withdrawal from the problem, the environment, and each other. Verbalizing becomes an abstraction from total organic response and is used in place of contact to obscure the self, and when cleverly done, this is difficult to catch. Dialogue, on the other hand, is simply a further expression of a total human communication (connection) onstage.

47. Train actors to handle theatrical reality, not illusion.

48. Do not teach. *Expose* students to the theatrical environment through playing, and they will find their own way.

49. Nothing is separate. In the unity of things rests growth and knowledge. Technical facts about the theater are available to everyone through many books. We seek far more than information about the theater.

50. In the seed rests the flowering tree. So must the acting problems hold within them the prefiguring of their results from which "the individual in the art and the art in the individual" can flourish.

51. To evolve problems to solve problems requires a person with rich knowledge of the field.

52. Creativity is not rearranging; it is transformation.

53. Sentiment, tear-jerking, etc. are cultural weapons. On our stages, let us cry and laugh not from old frames of reference but from the sheer joy of watching human beings explore a greater beyond.

54. Imagination belongs to the intellect. When we ask someone to imagine something, we are asking them to go into their own frame of reference, which might be limited. When we ask them to *see*, we are placing them in an objective situation where reaching out into the environment can take place, in which further awareness is possible.

55. Tension should be a natural part of the activity between players without every scene ending in a conflict to make something happen (release can come out of agreement). This is not easily understood. A rope between players might set up opposite goals (conflict) in a tug-of-war, yet a rope between players pulling them all up a mountain could have similar tension with all pulling together towards the same goal. Tension and release are implicit in problem-solving.

56. For improvisational theater, a player must always see and direct all action to fellow players and not to the character being played. In this way each player will always know to whom to throw the ball, and players can help each other out. During performance and workshop, knowing this, when one has gone astray, the other can pull him or her back into the scene (game).

57. Some students find it very difficult to keep from "writing a play." They remain separate from the group and never interrelate. Their withdrawal blocks progress during the group-planning sessions and while working onstage. They do not enter into relationships but manipulate their fellow students and the stage environment for their own purposes. This "playwriting" within the group violates the group agreement, prevents process with the other players, and keeps the user from achieving an expanding creative personal experience. Playwriting is not scene improvisation. Scene improvisation can only evolve out of group agreement and playing. If playwriting continues as the session progresses, the players do not understand the focus. Sometimes a whole group, not understanding this point, will all be playwriting.

58. The player must be aware of himself or herself in the environment equally with other players. This gives self-identity without the need for exhibitionism. This is equally true of the teacher or group leader.

59. Work for equality in the workshops and retreat from imposing the teacher's authority. Allow the acting exercises to do the work. When students feel they "did it themselves," the teacher has succeeded in his or her role.

60. Caution: if students consistently fail to solve the problem and fall back on ad-libbing, playwriting, joke-making, and working separately,

with body and body movement misshapen and distorted, their whole foundation is shaky. They have been rushed, or the function of group agreement and the focus has never been understood. They must go back to the earlier exercises and work on the simplest object involvements until they are sure enough of the beginning material to advance successfully.

61. No one can play a game unless intent both on the object and the fellow player.

62. Improvising in itself is not a system of training. It is one of the results of the training. Natural unrehearsed speech and response to a dramatic situation are only part of the total training. When "improvising" becomes an end in itself, it can kill spontaneity while fostering cleverness. Growth ceases as the performers take over. The more gifted and clever the players, the more difficult it is to discover this. Everyone ad-libs every waking hour of the day and responds to the world through the senses. It is the enriching, restructuring, and integration of all of these daily life responses for use in the art form that makes up the training of the actor for scene improvisation and formal theater.

63. A moment of grandeur comes to everyone when they act out of their humanness without need for acceptance, exhibitionism, or applause. An audience knows this and responds accordingly.

64. It takes a penetrating eye to see the environment, one's self within it, and make contact with it.

65. All of us must constantly dig around, above, and below, cutting away the jungle to find the path.

66. In playing, for better or for worse we all throw ourselves into the same pool.

67. An audience is neither refreshed nor entertained when not included as part of the playing.

68. A fixed attitude is a closed door.

69. When urgency (anxiety) appears, find the focus and hang on. It is the tail of the comet.

70. Individual freedom (expressing self) while respecting community responsibility (group agreement) is our goal.

71. The game exercises train for formal theater as well. Keep students

working with both formal and improvisational theater for a rounded experience.

72. Rote response to what is going on is a treadmill.

73. Student-actors hang on to themselves out of sheer desperation, fearful they might "fall off the cliff."

74. Acting is doing.

75. Right of individual choice is part of group agreement.

76. No one player can decide that a scene (game) is ended even if his or her theater sense is correct. If for any reason a player wishes to leave the scene, it may be done by inciting action within the group to end the scene by solving the problem, or, failing that, the player may find a reason to exit within the structure of the scene.

77. Group agreement is not permissiveness; it simply keeps everyone playing the same game.

78. Let the object put us in motion.

79. It is difficult to understand the need for a "blank" mind free of preconceptions when working on an acting problem. Yet everyone knows that you cannot fill a basket unless it is empty.

80. Contact comes out of our sensory equipment. Self-protection (assumption, prejudices, etc.) keeps us from contact.

81. It takes courage to move out into the new, the unknown.

82. The theater games are interactive. If students do not show some integration of earlier exercises when working on new ones, the workshops may be pushing ahead too quickly.

83. When players are always alerted and willing to come to each other's aid as needed, each member of the cast is given a sense of security. This mutual support brings a feeling of well-being to the audience.

84. Any player who "steals" a scene is a thief.

85. A close-working group in improvisational theater often communicates on a non-verbal level with uncanny skill and swiftness.

86. Improvisation is not exchange of information between players; it is communion.

87. Any player who feels urgent about the game and plays it alone does not trust his fellow players.

88. Many want only to reaffirm their own frame of reference and will resist a new experience.

89. Players must learn to use any and every break made during the solving of problems for the onstage event. Breaks, for the most part, are momentarily pulling away from the stage environment and relationships. If this happens through laughter, for instance, the teacher-director simply side-coaches, "Use your laughter." This is easily picked up by the player, who utilizes the energy and "legalizes" it within the scene. A student-actor soon learns that there is no such thing as a break on stage, for anything that happens is energy that can be channeled into the mainstream of the playing.

90. On stage, one's *taking* is the other's *giving*.

91. Everyone, including the teacher-director, is strengthened and moves towards action and leadership when reasons for not doing something (or doing something) are not acceptable. The simple statement, "There is always a reason," keeps the student from verbalizing reasons further. It is important to know that each and every reason is valid, whether it be socially acceptable or not, whether it be in truth "a sick grandmother" or just dilly-dallying, for in every case the reason created the present problem, whether it be lateness to rehearsal or a quarrel between players. When the youngest actor knows that the only thing that matters is to keep the game going and that a reason is but a past step that holds up the playing, he or she is freed from the need to be servile. Reasons have value to us only when they are an integral part of and help us to understand the present situation. Any other reason is imposed. It is a private matter and therefore useless except for possible subjective reasons.

92. An object can be put in motion only through its own nature and will not respond to manipulation. To transform or alter an object requires total absorption without meddling. Let it happen! Stay out of it!

93. The question often arises, "Is the child more fanciful, freer than the adult?" Actually, when the adults are freed for the experiencing, their contribution to scene improvisation is far greater.

94. No one knows the outcome of a game until one plays it.

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95. Without the other player, there is no game. We cannot play tag if there is no one to tag us.

96. Scene improvisation will never grow out of the artificial separation of players by the "star" system. Players with unusual skills will be recognized and applauded without being separated from their fellow players. Group harmony pleases an audience and brings a new dimension to the theater.