

DRAMA *Works*

**THE BASICS:
The Building Blocks
of Examination Drama**

EXTRACT

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INTRODUCTION

With more and more schools taking class drama out of the curriculum up to and including Year 9, this resource is in answer to the need for a quick introductory course for all students starting out on examination work. It will serve for examinations at both 15 plus level as well as for sixth forms, and even beyond.

My many years in Further and Higher Education taught me the need for a few introductory weeks with all students, so that every one of them starts with the same basic knowledge. Some of them will know some of it already, but it never does any harm to reiterate! In any group, though, you will certainly have students with frighteningly little knowledge, just a vague idea that drama might be fun or, let's face the truth, a number who think it may be a doss. How to educate these students into the hard work necessary to create pieces of theatre suitable for the higher examination levels, without disenchanting them as to the fun element, is one of the aims of this resource.

The work to follow covers the necessity of creating a bonded group out of a random set of individuals, practice in the basics of differing acting styles, as well as practice in the roles of director, and advice on stage management and the design skills. Theatre vocabulary is important too, as well as an understanding of stage shapes and how they affect performance. This resource aims to cover all those needs in a clear and practical way.

As with all my other resources, the work is based entirely on practice, from my firm belief that students learn and remember more by doing than merely by listening and taking notes. Of course, the necessity for writing is a companion skill, but it should come out of experience and will be the better [in the sense of being more personal and sincere] for that experience. At this level no exercise should be done without analysis of what has been achieved or learned from the experience.

Essential equipment for any drama studio:

- enough canes for a complete class. Garden canes, preferably about seven foot in length if your studio has a high enough ceiling, shorter if not, are cheap and easy to pick up from any garden centre.
- a quantity of large cloths - lengths, squares - doesn't matter the shape, but a variety of colours and sizes is good
- percussion instruments - which can be home-made from lentils inside tins, saucepan lids, etc. Again a variety of sound abilities from soft to loud/ hard
- strips of cloth/scarves for blindfolds
- balls of different sizes
- beanbags
- quantities of newspaper, cardboard rolls from the inside of wrapping paper, and so on

You can add a box of hats and props like bags, spectacles, telephones, etc. but I tend to use these more realistic things for the younger groups. By this stage of their lives, I usually demand that a group uses things that require imagination to make them into what you want them to be.

Extract One

KEEPING THE SPIRIT OF GENEROSITY - BASIC IMPROVISATION

Of course, all your more experienced students will have participated in improvisation before, but there may be others who have not. What we take for granted is not easy for those who haven't experienced drama before.

Take a partner. With an uneven group, the teacher may have to partner with one of the students, though this is not ideal. At this stage, it would be better to be watching the students, checking for reality in what they are doing.

The pairs face each other, with a few paces' distance between them. Between them is an imaginary rope. Spend some time having them handle the 'rope', feeling its width, its weight, its texture. Then they have a tug-of-war. Planning is not allowed. The rope must have reality; it cannot stretch and become longer! Someone wins, at a point when one decides to allow the other to - no planning for this. The teacher must feel the effort required, that it's real.

Next work together, both holding the rope which is attached to a boat that needs pulling up the shore. Again, the texture of the rope should look real and the weight of the imaginary boat.

In groups of five or six, the rope has become a skipping rope turned by two people whilst the others run in and jump the rope as it turns once or twice before running out and letting the next person come in. Concentrate throughout on maintaining the reality of the rope. Swap around until everyone has had a turn working with a partner to turn the rope for the others.

Back to the pairs, but this time they choose for themselves an imaginary object with which to engage. Ideas could be:

- a bed sheet or counterpane to fold**
- a tablecloth to spread on a table**
- a heavy rock which needs to be moved**
- a loaded up toboggan to pull**
- a large piece of furniture to move**

After pairs, try the same kind of thing with groups of three or four. All must be actively engaged in the actual pushing, lifting or whatever. No one acts as foreman, or stands outside the action in any way. The exercise is about working in co-operation together. Ideas for this might be:

- lifting a long heavy metal bar - it's not bendy! - from one place to another**
- pushing a car so that it is safely off the road**
- pulling a large fishing net out of the water**
- folding up a large tarpaulin**

Have the group in two lines, facing each other, a fair distance between. The focus of the following is weight. Number along the two lines 1,2,3; 1,2,3. So everyone is one of these numbers. Then call out instructions: all number 1s to cross over carrying...; all number 2s to ..., etc. Ideas could include:

- a heavy case and a lighter one**
- a very full bucket of water**
- a large sack of potatoes**
- a large bag of balls for a ball-pool [big bag but light]**
- a beachball which you are throwing up and catching**
- a netball [or similar size] which you are bouncing on the ground and catching**
- a sheaf of helium balloons**

a small very muddy dog
a crying baby
a tottering pile of books
a tottering pile of folded clothes

At all times the rest of the group must watch carefully. How believable is everyone being? Is the whole body engaged? Can you see the weight of the object? Can you see the shape of the object?

Discuss afterwards their findings, not during the exercise, which should be done with concentration and without interruption.

Discourage comments that are purely negative. Ask questions that are weighted towards the idea of what is needed to make such an exercise believable to an audience, where they will pick out moments of believability from what they have watched rather than those they did not believe in. This will include the idea of muscular engagement - to give the feeling of weight, the body must show it in the tension of the face and every other muscle. Memory is also important. All of these activities will have become more believable if the students have done something like it before in real life. Discuss where it was not so believable. Was it because that object or activity was outside their experience? In that case - what is needed to help the actor, who may have to do something on stage they have never done in real life?

The conclusion you are hoping they will come up with is that often acting is about a mixture of experience [the memory of that experience] and imagination. Later, when we are looking at the basic building blocks of different acting styles, you will be able to refer back to this conclusion and show how it is the basis for Stanislavskian Naturalistic acting.

Engagement with imaginary objects continues in the next group of exercises, which all feature games. Before starting any of these, have the students 'handle' the imaginary object, lift it, feel its weight, concentrate completely on it, before working with his partner or group. Here are some ideas to use:

With a partner:

play tennis
play badminton
play squash
play beach ball
set up and play ludo/ snakes and ladders or similar
shuffle, deal and play a game of cards

In all cases remind of the need for concentration and for complete believability. An audience should see those objects as if they were really there.

As a whole group:

divide into teams and run a relay round the studio, passing the imaginary baton
play a game of football/ netball/ rounders. This takes immense group concentration. Stop it as soon as the ball involved has become more than one! Now try it again in slow motion, where all the group members must keep their eye on the 'ball'.

The above exercises need to be processed by the students and understood. What has it taught them about acting? And about working together?

From the above lessons, we will move now into the basic lessons needed for improvisation.

Start by having one confident student standing up, in front of the audience of the others. Then feed him an opening line:

Have you seen my phone/ keys? [The tone of this should indicate whether you're being a friend/ family member/ teacher.]

Whatever the response is, talk about it with the group. Does it further the situation or

block it? A straight 'No' is a block, which might have had to result in another line from the initiator: 'Well, you were the last to use it/ them' or similar. Even a 'yes' is not generous enough, because it is in danger of finishing the dialogue too quickly. 'No, but I'll help you look' might be good, or adopting a definite character attitude might be better still: 'Oh for goodness' sake, you're always losing things. Why can't you be more organised?' This instantly tells us that this is a close friend or a family member, depending on the tone. And so on.

Having talked and analysed how partners must further not block a dialogue. Play this as a kind of game. I usually have pieces of paper ready to hand out to each student with their opening line. **Have them make an entrance and pick someone out of the seated group to direct their question to. That person then has to get up and respond in an appropriate character.**

Some opening lines follow. This first grouping will most likely lead to quite ordinary or everyday situations.

How's your day been?

Guess what, I saw your sister last night with a really gorgeous bloke.

Fancy meeting you here.

Do you know where the nearest bus stop/ tube station is, please?

Now tell me - how can I help you?

Why didn't you call last night like you promised?

Oh my goodness, are you all right?

Do you think we're in the right place?

That's brilliant! How did you do it?

Don't try to get round me.

We need to talk.

I have a feeling this isn't going to work.

Why are you looking at me like that?

We have to be really quiet.

That guy's not going to come back, so don't worry.

I'm going to call the police.

Oh, please don't cry.

Who are you?

You can't leave until you've finished.

You never take any notice of me.

Encourage the students at first to keep things going as long as the situation works. Congratulate them if they have found and maintained a character. Discuss afterwards what is the hardest thing about this kind of instant drama. Usually it will be recognising when to end. Having spotted this, give them another chance to see if they can solve an ending as well as a beginning.

The following may well lead to more bizarre situations.

Have you seen my pet giraffe?

Do you think we'll make it if we jump?

Look how small the earth looks from here.

I think we killed her.

I'm terrified of snakes.

Is this how it's all going to end?

We've eaten the last of the food.

None of them have a clue, do they?

I can hear the sirens.

Who let you in? It's supposed to be locked.

I've never been so high up.

Come and help man the barricades.

He's got to be stopped.

This book is tastier than the last.

Extract Two

Were there people in the group [i.e. part of the activity which a number are doing, not the one behaving differently] who the audience found themselves drawn to. Can they say why that was?

Hopefully, without prompting, they will start realising that there is a kind of concentration or energy that can also draw an audience to watch. This is the leashed intensity, which is an important part of drawing an audience to watch you.

Here are some exercises you can do to help prove that.

Set up an empty chair facing the audience, centre front. Have one actor come alone into the playing area with the rest of the group sitting as audience. The actor stands and looks at the audience, then sits down and continues to look at them. Hold both the standing and then the sitting as long as possible. Then analyse all together.

Was the single activity - the change from standing to sitting - enough to retain interest for the audience?

How long was the audience happy to watch the standing and then the sitting?

Did the actor find it difficult just to stand whilst being watched, and just to sit? What did he feel? Embarrassed? Awkward? Uncaring?

Did the actor come up with a strategy to help him through? If so, what?

Give three actors each a different secret instruction:

you are counting in your head up to one hundred, very slowly

you are thinking about someone you love very much. Bring that person alive in your head. See him/ her saying or doing something you have witnessed recently.

you are doing precisely what was done in the last exercise, except this time you are just going straight to the chair and sitting down and looking at the audience

Ask the three to come up onto the playing area one at a time and sit down in the chair facing the audience.

When all three have had their turn, analyse. Was there any difference between the three actors? First of all talk about it from the audience point of view. Then move to the actor's point of view. Was it easier for the actors who had something other than the audience on which to focus?

If you are able to, try sitting a single person in a spotlight on the empty playing space. Does the fact of the actor being picked out by light create an expectation in an audience? Are they prepared to wait for longer before becoming bored? What about spotlighting the actor who is given something to focus on? Try this too.

The fact is that audiences will wait longer and bear with silence and nothing happening for far longer than you might think. And this teaches us something: **NOT EVERY MOMENT ON STAGE HAS TO BE FILLED WITH FRENZIED ACTIVITY.** In fact, an audience requires changes of pace, variety, to keep their attention, something that the best directors and companies make full use of.

Many practitioners have spent years experimenting on the lines indicated above. Peter Brook springs to mind, Stanislavski of course, and also Boal and Grotowski. They wanted to find out what creates that magical link between actor and audience. Stanislavski wanted to overcome the fear that an actor has of an audience and his solution is to give the actor objectives, something to fill his mind so that he forgets his fear. Other practitioners have taken this further. Giving an actor an objective is one way of creating the kind of concentration which translates into energy, that magnetism we are talking about. But there are other ways of creating that watchable energy too. It doesn't have to be something built up in the mind. The focus of the body, where an actor is wrapped up with pushing himself to its limitations, or enjoying the beauty of movement, or copying the movement of something else, also creates energy. In other words, the focus can be either interior or exterior.

Experiment with this idea. We'll start with inner objectives, as Stanislavski suggested.

With the whole group, have them move freely around the room, in silence, freezing on a handclap. When they have stopped still, instruct them that they are straining at the leash to get away from the place they are at present rooted. Every part of their bodies wants to escape. Just this thought should make them adjust their position accordingly without actually moving - it will happen in the tension of their muscles. Then tell them to move their heads and find a part of the room that they really want to get to. They should invent a reason to build up in their minds: the sun is shining there; the person they love is standing there; their favourite pet is sitting there, could be examples. Then release them into movement towards that destination. Note that the movement should fit with the objective that fills their mind. You should be able to tell by watching what motivates them.

Prove this by having half the group watch the other half, then vice versa.

Now try the same thing, but this time each member of the group builds up an inner objective which will make them reluctant to move - though they must. It could be they have been ordered to by someone they fear; there is something unnatural about the way their pet is lying; the wood ahead looks dark and difficult when they are at present in the sun - and so on. Once again have half the group observe and then swap over.

Complete engagement in an activity of any sort acts as a magnet to an audience. By complete engagement, I mean both physical and mental. If the actor can achieve that total involvement in what he is doing, it doesn't matter whether the movement is large or small, slow or fast, it will engage the active participation of the audience. I don't mean that the audience will get up and join in, but rather that they will observe in a way that is as concentrated as the actor's. It is the two-way feeding into what is happening on the stage - from the actor and the audience - which creates the energy necessary to what Brook calls a Moment of Wonder. This kind of intensity cannot happen without both audience and actor. The energy created by mentally active, engaged watching and mentally or physically active engaged doing is much greater than the sum of its two parts.

Pick a number of students, about four or five, to either run as fast as possible around the playing area, or run as fast as possible on the spot. At a signal from the teacher, these people, whose energy has been 'wound up' by intense physical activity, run towards the audience, stopping just short of them. They need to feel the momentum of the energy working within them - their whole face and body should be animated and filled with vibrant excitement. They freeze in front of the audience, but try to communicate their energy to them through eyes, face, body tension.

The audience just watches, but tries to assess the moment when the 'actor' becomes less watchable, because their energy is dissipating. At that moment, one of the people sitting directly in front of the actor reaches out to touch him and he sits down.

Try this with a further group or two - for as long as it takes for the audience to understand what it is they are seeing.

Next pick a similar size group and give them each an object to hold - a cane perhaps, or a ball. They should focus on that object with all their attention, until it becomes imbued with significance for them. The object must then be carried with enormous care from one part of the playing place to another. Treat it as if it is breakable or of great emotional significance. The movement from this group of actors will be slow, but if done properly, the concentration built up is very watchable. Then ask the actors to stand on the spot and move their object in the space above and around their own bodies. At all times, their eyes are concentrated on their object with complete attention.

Extract Three

THE SPIRIT OF GENEROSITY CONTINUED - INTRODUCTION TO TEXT

So far we have concentrated on improvisation, an essential feature when building up a script from scratch as the students will need to do for the devising component of their examination. Much of what we have done so far are essential building blocks for the devising process.

Lack of ego, give and take, generosity and sensitivity are all essential components of the drama process, as much for scriptwork as for the devising process.

To give an idea of what this entails, divide the class up into pairs [with one threesome for an odd number]. Both partners take turns in telling the other something important, without verbal interruption from the silent one, though sounds, facial expression, gestures, physical touching if appropriate, are all permissible and indeed to be encouraged. The idea is to show that the person who is silent on stage needs to be as much a part of the scene as the one who is speaking.

ideas might be:

news about his/her recent engagement

some juicy bit of scandal

some revelation about the past

an explanation of the bad/miserable/ angry or joyful mood the speaker is in.

Show a sample of these to the rest of the group, who focus on the silent one for comment.

The next exercise gives examples of monologues where one person is talking to another who is on stage but silent. Part of the importance of generosity is to allow another person on stage to have his moment in full focus. In each of the following examples, someone is having his moment of focus whilst the other person is taking a back seat. But this does not mean the silent partner is not acting. Their acting in response to the situation allows their partner to shine. It is just as important. **To prove this point, have a couple of volunteers stand up and call them A and B. A is trying to communicate something important to B, but B ignores him. Worse than that - not only does he ignore but he acts as if his partner is not there, as if he is in a personal glass bubble listening to his own inner silence. His face is blank, his eyes expressionless. How long can A keep up his efforts without feeling the need to shake B or vent his frustration in some other way?**

So being the silent partner onstage is as much a matter of give-and-take, of sensitivity and generosity, as so much of the work we have already been doing.

Allow each pair to choose one of the following pieces of text with which to work. There will not be enough for everyone in your group to have different duologues if you have a large class, but no matter. The person who is not speaking is the focus of this exercise and everyone will respond in a different way.

Note that the focus of this exercise is the give-and-take of the partnership. There may not be time in your schedule for the speakers to learn their monologues, but they must be as much prepared and on top of what they are saying and how they are saying it as possible. Allow a decent length of time for the pairs to rehearse [with one threesome if necessary. I have indicated the extracts where a second silent partner could be used.]

Since the focus is more on the silent partner, they will need to look carefully for clues as to how to react. They should take into consideration: their relationship with the speaker, whether the piece is largely serious in intent, or comic and whether they are sympathetic or in opposition. They should establish the mood of the silent partner and