

TEAMBUILDING through IMPROVISATION

In theatre training, actors learn human behavior skills so that they can apply intention to visible action in order to create interaction that appears real in given situations. In business, similar skills are required in order to interact effectively across diverse groups in real situations. *Improvisation* is the invention or fabrication of a story or line of logic using a given set of parameters.

The act of improvising is typically not done alone, since interaction is a key component of the process. This is why improvisational activities are excellent vehicles to help groups or "teams" interact effectively. Teambuilding through improvisation is both fun and effective in helping presenters understand the dynamics of human interaction.

We found this link, <http://www.learnimprov.com/> most helpful in compiling this abbreviated list of 42 improvisational activities.

The website, named [Hugh's List of Improv Handles](http://www.learnimprov.com/), is maintained by Hugh McLeod (hugh@hwcn.org). The site functions as an *in-depth* reference to an extensive list of improvisational structures and games, complete with playing hints, alternate names, etc. Credits to the originators of these activities (if known) are also given on the site.

All of the activities suggested in this document are originally designed for improvisational comedy. However, at MediaNet, we assign delivery skills to these activities using a business perspective. Since stage acting techniques are based on spontaneity and the understanding of human behavior, improvisation provides an excellent training ground for developing *people* skills.

These skills are the staple of all presenters and all teams who work together for a common presentation goal. We have identified 33 unique delivery skills that can be enhanced using these improvisational techniques.

The activities are grouped into three areas: WARM-UPS, HANDLES and EXERCISES, and arranged alphabetically within each section. Every activity develops several skills, and, in some cases, gimmicks and variations are noted.

At the very end of this document, there is a list of "ask-fors". Since many activities contain an instruction to "get" something from the audience, an "ask-for" is what the director of an activity uses to prompt the group for a suggestion.

DELIVERY SKILLS

By practicing improvisational activities, presenters can develop the lateral thinking and creativeness necessary for effective communication within groups and among team members, as well. The following descriptions, arranged alphabetically, cover the related delivery skills found in a variety of the improvisational structures noted in this document.

ACCEPTING – the capacity to immediately empathize with the existing situation, regardless of preconceived notions. This enables a presenter to recognize diversity and tolerate adverse opinions.

ACCURACY – the ability to quickly get to the point. This is useful during Q & A moments.

ACTION – the external expression of a strong choice, represented in a physical manner using the body and voice. This helps develop control of body language.

ADAPTING – the capacity to acclimate to a particular situation, although not necessarily accepting the circumstances. This aids a presenter during those times where a sense of logic and common sense appear to be lacking.

ADVANCING – the ability to move a story forward, from “point A” to “point B”, based on the natural progression of logic or emotion. This is a critical presentation skill in order to close, persuade, or influence a person.

ANTICIPATING – the quickness of expecting the unexpected based on a history of predictable outcomes. This skill also develops with experience, since business situations tend to repeat.

ATTENTION TO DETAIL – the talent for fine-tuning a perspective without cluttering the concept or over explaining the idea.

CLARITY – the flair for simplifying an issue without overstating or underestimating relative importance.

COMMITMENT – the tenacity to take responsibility for an expressed choice. For a presenter, any deviation from the chosen path will be seen as a limitation.

CONFLICT-MANAGEMENT – the capacity to see both sides of a situation while facilitating a positive (win-win) outcome.

COOPERATION – the quality of effort that always adds value toward a common goal.

CREATING A SENSE OF URGENCY – exacting a pressure that identifies and targets the specific importance of a concept or idea. The art of persuasion is based on this principle.

CREATING ANALOGIES – the ability to find similar, real-world applications of defined parameters for a given issue. Comparisons to transportation, health, family, food or life experiences are the best analogies.

DEDUCTION – the natural transition used to show the reasoning behind a given line of logic. In presenting, this skill is used to thread a group of concepts into a flowing script.

FLOW – the functional layout of scripted logic, placed on a timeline and paced in a pleasing manner.

FOCUSING – the aptitude for finding the center of attention at any given moment of a situation. The lack of this skill causes presenters to drift off-topic and get sidetracked.

INTENTION - the internal expression of a strong choice, represented in a mental manner using the mind and heart.

JUSTIFICATION – the internal measurement of belief in a personal choice. Expressed outwardly as self-confidence, this validates information for an audience.

LISTENING – the level of attentiveness to audible content and patterns of speech. A good listener hears the sound of silence between spoken phrases in order to grasp the pace of a person’s voice. This avoids interrupting, overlapping, or cutting off the dialogue.

LOGIC – the sequential and predictable display of related information, whether legitimate or flawed, that leads to a decision.

MAINTAINING INTEGRITY – the facility to sustain a strict adherence to a value proposition without losing sight of the objective.

OBSERVING VISUAL CUES – the ability to detect and decipher actions and reactions, such as body language, facial expressions and other noticeable forms of feedback.

PROVIDING RESOLUTION – the capacity to reduce complexity into simplicity, while seeking the best outcome (win-win) possible.

REFERENCES AND ALTERNATIVES – the components of support for a given line of logic. Presenters with more experience are likely to have a wealth of backup information at their fingertips available to overcome argumentative objections.

RELATIONSHIP-BUILDING – the knack for finding similar interests, desires or needs, while creating a common bond in the process.

ROLE REVERSAL – taking on opposing character traits in order to understand a situation. Presenters who can play “devils advocate” (opposing their own concepts or ideas) can develop stronger arguments to support a line of logic.

SELECTIVITY –choosing the unique and relative details of an issue specific to the immediacy of the situation.

SHARING – the willing effort to offer others a chance to enjoy a particular experience. This skill reduces nervousness (butterflies, jitters, stage fright, etc.) because it forces a presenter to focus externally (on others), rather than internally (on self).

SHIFTING FOCUS – the process of directing or giving attention to a particular view (person, group, support item, etc.). Presenters use this skill to draw attention to support materials (a display visual), to others in the room (during interaction) or to imaginaries (virtual props & space).

SUPPORT – the effort given to promote or defend a particular choice. A presenter uses this as a collaborative skill when advancing a particular line of logic shared by at least one other person.

TABLE-SETTING – the ability to preset the conditions, parameters, or guidelines relevant to a particular line of logic. Presenters always provide a necessary bias (selective data) to support a point of view.

TIMING – the aptitude for positioning the key component of an issue as near as possible to the highest moment of acceptance.

USING VIRTUAL PROPS AND SPACE – the talent for representing thought through visible action. Presenters can use physical movements (gestures, body language, etc.) to identify the unique and specific components of a concept or idea.

IMPROVISATIONAL STRUCTURES

There are three kinds of structures used to develop human behavior skills --- warm-ups, handles and exercises.

A “warm-up” is just a functional component of an exercise or handle, with the express purpose of heightening awareness and limbering-up the senses.

A “handle” is actually a larger expression of an “exercise”. It is the “playing out” of specific content across a longer period of time.

Many of the theatrical terms (players, stage, actors, etc.) are purposely left in the descriptions so as not to lose sight of the fact that human behavior is really the *performance* of people in given situations.

WARM-UPS

Warm-ups are very short exercises used to build rapport and to get the energy of a group moving forward.

Digits (warm-up)

Introduction:

This exercise is designed to get everyone in the group in harmony. So, get into a tight circle.

Description:

Everyone in the circle looks down at the ground and closes their eyes. Someone will count off the number one. Then, someone else will count off the number two. No one knows who will speak the next number. If two people speak out at the *same time* then the group must start counting again at one. It is common to try to count to twenty. Usually there is such rejoicing when twenty is reached and the warm-up is over.

Gimmicks:

One person counts really fast and doesn't give anyone else a chance to speak.

Variations:

Go through the letters of the alphabet, count downwards.

Delivery Skills:

listening; accepting

Free Association (warm-up)

Introduction:

This warm-up will help get everyone into the “moment”, while allowing for some silliness.

Description:

The group can be structured in circles, and one person starts off by saying any word. The person to his/her left lets fly with the absolute first thing that comes to mind after hearing the previous word. There should be no pause to find "something funny" or to edit thoughts. This is not a psychoanalysis exercise, but one to get people pulling down those barriers to creative thinking. Associations like "boss" and then “napalm" are quite common and no cause for worry.

Gimmicks:

Try it in gibberish.

Variations:

Firing Line is where one person is required to do all the word associations. Six people line up and fire off words that they have pre-planned. The player on the firing line responds immediately with a free word association.

Delivery Skills:

listening; accepting; commitment; support

Jeepers Peepers (warm-up)

Introduction:

This warm-up is designed to try to get us everyone *in sync*. Get into a tight circle.

Description:

Everyone looks down at the ground, not making eye contact with anyone else. The group all counts to three, and on "three" everyone looks up at once. Each player in the circle is responsible for making a strong choice, and they must either look to their left, their right, or directly across the circle. If players make eye contact, both scream and step out of the circle. This activity is continued until all are out of the circle.

Delivery Skills:

accepting; commitment, support

HANDLES

The handles list is composed of those improvisational structures that work best on stage or in front of a group. They all have the crucial audience participation component and they also have built in gimmicks that also increase the chance that comedy will happen. This allows for a fun factor in developing a skill.

Eventually the games wear thin, but as long as the rules of environment, character and story are being maintained any handle should be as entertaining as any other handle.

Backwards Scene (handle)

Synonyms:

Rewind Scene, Reverse Scene

Introduction:

In this scene the actors will tell a story backwards. They will not be talking backwards, or moving in reverse, but they will present the components of the scene from the 'end' to the 'beginning.' This is a very hard scene.

Description:

The actors start with an ending to a story. Then each actor must ask herself what would have happened immediately before this event and then portrays the most likely thing that would have occurred. Actors will find themselves frequently asking themselves, "he just said...so I would have..." Very hard stuff. Keep it very simple and never talk in the future tense, that already has happened!!

Gimmicks:

This game is hard enough already. One can get really overconfident by starting the scene with a lights down signal, and end the scene with an introduction.

Variations:

None

Delivery Skills:

logic; flow; support; listening; accepting; anticipating; deduction

Categories (handle)

Synonyms:

The Pun Game

Introduction:

In this scene each actor will be assigned a general category of stuff. During the scene the actor must reference his assigned category as often as possible. For instance if his category were “cars” he could reference cars by puns, analogies or direct references.

Description:

The person setting this scene up must be certain to get general categories for the actors to work from. Categories like: cars, toys, cutlery, vegetables, etc. The actors should carry out a regular scene and reference the category that has been assigned to them as often as possible.

Gimmicks:

This is already a gimmick.

Variations:

This can be made competitive where the players must list-off all the things from a category.

Delivery Skills:

creating analogies; references and alternatives; focusing

Die Game (handle)

Synonyms:

Make A Story, Pointer, Directed Story, Conducted Story

Introduction:

In this game all the players on stage will be telling a story. Each player is responsible for the story while the director is pointing at them. When the director switches from one player to another, the other player must pick up the story without stuttering, repeating words, or making grammatical errors. If any of the players makes such an error the audience should yell DIE!!

Description:

The players should tell a story through action, and not waste time having the character thinking about things. The director should change from player to player slowly at first, allowing a logical story to build. As the game goes on she can switch from one player to another faster and faster.

Gimmicks:

Breaking off the player in mid-word. Pointing at two players simultaneously.

Variations:

Elimination Die: Each player that makes a mistake is eliminated until only one player is left.

Theatrical Die: After making a mistake the player acts out a death on stage. Make a story: Same thing with no die or elimination. Genre Story: Each player is given a different genre and continues to tell the same story through that genre. Genre story can be emotional story, appliance story, occupation story, etc.

Delivery Skills:

listening; accepting; advancing; support; logic; flow

Do Run Run Song (handle)

Synonyms:

DA Do Run Run, Do Ron Ron, Do Run Ron, etc

Introduction:

The players are going to tell a story in the format of a classic pop song.

Description:

Several players line up and start to sing in the following pattern. A, A, B, B, B. This is best explained by example:

Player one, "I went to the drugstore to buy some pop."

All players, "a do run run run, a do run run."

Player two, "And on the way up there I met a cop."

All players, "a do run run run, a do run run."

Player three, "hey, and that cop was lean."

Player four, "hey, and she made a scene."

Player one, "hey, and she was really mean."

All players, "a do run run run, a do run run."

Player TWO then begins a second verse, such as, "The thin lady copy pinned me to the car."

All players, "a do run run run, a do run run."

Player three, "and that's how I got this terrible scar."

All players, "a do run run run, a do run run."

Player four, "hey, and the scar looks cool"

Player one, "hey, but I quit my school."

Player two, "hey, cause now I always drool."

All players, "a do run run run, a do run run."

And so on... until the story is told. There are all kinds of variations to this. Its format is particularly forgiving of those who cannot sing all that well. It is recommended that the player doing the solo line step forward from the line of players.

Gimmicks:

When someone gets stuck just punch out any verse and the rest of the players kick in with a supportive do run run. This isn't really a gimmick, it is the way that improv should always be performed: commitment and support.

Variations:

It can be turned into a die type game, where the players that slip up are dropped from the line. There are an infinite number of variations that can be made to the song itself.

Delivery Skills:

listening; accepting; commitment; support

Dubbing Game (handle)

Synonyms:

Voice Over Game

Introduction:

In this scene there will be two actors offstage and two actors on-stage. Actor A's (on-stage) voice will be supplied by actor B (offstage) and actor C's (on-stage) voice will be supplied by actor D (offstage). However the actor's supplying the voices (B and D) will not be able to see what the other two actors (A and C) are doing

Description:

The actors supplying the voices must make distinctly different voices. It is also important that the actors that are being dubbed move their mouths like they are speaking when the dubbers are talking. It is important to have an activity and to justify what is being said through activity.

Gimmicks:

The moving actors should make large obvious physical choices that they must justify when their dubber makes a contradicting statement. A chainsaw becomes an ax, a hug a punch, and so on.

Variations:

Straight dubbing: the dubbing players can watch the actors. Cross dubbing: the two actors on stage dub each other's words (very hard). Three-way dubbing: actor one dubs actor two and actor two dubs actor three and actor three dubs actor one.

Delivery Skills:

listening; observing; accepting; focusing; support

Emotional Transfer (handle)

Synonyms:

Status Transfer, Emotional Switch

Introduction:

In this scene the two actors will be assigned contrasting emotions. At some point in the scene they must switch the emotions from one player to the other.

Description:

The emotions must be contrasting (love, and hate), and the players must make strong choices in the beginning of the scene. The transition is best appreciated if it is done subtly and the transfer is somehow justified within the context of the scene.

Gimmicks:

None

Variations:

This can be done with status (high versus low), and the players must make a switch in status within the scene. Any of the endowments can be switched: political beliefs, animals, appliances, vehicle types, etc.

Delivery Skills:

intention; action; commitment; role reversal; conflict-management

Endowment Scenes (handle)

Synonyms:

Repair Shop, Crime Endowment, Home Late Scene, Santa Scene, Who am I?

Introduction:

In this scene we will ask a player to leave the stage. The player offstage has committed a crime. She is willing to confess to the crime, however she cannot remember what the crime is. If her interrogators can let her know what the crime is she will confess. Ask for [unusual crime, unrelated device, location]. When the criminal is close to getting the crime you-all (audience), must ooh-aah to let her know. When she gets a part of the crime clap. If she confesses to the crime completely go wild.

Description:

The chosen introduction is for a crime endowment. The first note is really to the host introducing the scene. It is essential that the game be explained properly to the audience. If the audience doesn't give ooh-aah getting close feedback then the confessor will most likely be lost. The detectives getting the confession must stick to the order of their clues (crime, item, location), and not advance until the actor properly confesses. The detectives will have a lot more fun if they keep to subtle clues in the beginning of the scene, saving the obvious ones for when things are getting slow. The confessor should try and maintain a story within the confession. Giving reasons for the actions. There are ample opportunities for crossovers to help out the detectives.

Gimmicks:

If the confessor gets the clues too early she may play stupid, and draw out the game.

Variations:

The crime endowment was explained above. The home late scene is identical except that a youngster is explaining to her adults why she has come home so late. The host can get any items she wants, although the confessor (person being endowed) has to know the order of the items. The Santa scene is usually Santa Claus trying to tell a child what she wants for Christmas (usually one item). The repair shop is where some poor soul is returning a broken device, and they have no idea what it is. "Who am I?" gets an actor to deduce what famous person that he is. The possibilities are endless.

Delivery Skills:

listening; accepting; deduction; logic

Entrances and Exits (handle)

Synonyms:

The Word Game, Revolving Door, Exits

Introduction:

In this game each player is assigned some word that might come up in casual conversation. Whenever that word is spoken by another player in the scene they must enter or exit. If the player's word is spoken and she is offstage, she must immediately come on-stage and justify her entrance. If her word is spoken while on-stage she must immediately exit and justify her exit.

[assign words to each player]

Description:

This is a listening game. If you don't hear your word, the audience will immediately notice. If the players notice that someone has not heard their word, they should repeat it. Each player must also remember each of the other players' words. This scene can get quite chaotic. Remember to build a story and justify the entrances and exits. Saying your own word does not count.

Gimmicks:

Assigning someone a conjunction like: and, but or yes. This makes them blast in and out like a rubber ball. Not saying someone's word, and putting them in a situation where they have to leave: firing them, kicking them out the house, or leaving them in a burning room. Repeating someone's word rapidly giving them no choice, but to ping pong in and out of the scene.

Variations:

None

Delivery Skills:

listening; justification; advancing; action

Fairy Tale In A Minute (handle)

Synonyms:

Précis, Movie In A Minute, Study Note Fairy Tale

Introduction:

The players are going to present to you a fairy tale of your choice [get fairy tale known to most, recap it]. They are going to present this story in less than 1 minute starting now...

Description:

This is a high energy scene where all the essential components of the fairy tale must be portrayed in less than 60 seconds. Frenetic can be fun but the characters must be clear and sheer chaos will not be fun to watch.

Gimmicks:

This is a gimmicky game.

Variations:

Movie in a minute is another variation. Check to be sure that most of the players know what the story is, and remember to get a recap. Historical event in 45 seconds is fun too.

Delivery Skills:

selectivity; clarity, accuracy; flow; creating a sense of urgency

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Freeze Games (handle)

Synonyms:

Clap, Switch, Tag, Freeze-Tag

Introduction:

Two actors will start a scene. At any time during the scene an actor off stage can yell freeze! The actors must immediately freeze in position. The player that yelled freeze must assume the exact position of one of the actors and initiate a whole new scene starting in that position.

Description:

If we have to explain this one you have never seen or done improv (welcome of course!). The mistake that most players make is not assuming the exact position of the player clapped out. The audience notices this and the magic is lost. The best effect is had when the scene is frozen on an interesting position, so it is important to change position in the scene that you are in. Assume the new position quickly!! Sometimes simply a position change is all that is needed for the next freeze. Even though improv thought should be unedited, the following really are major freeze tag wimps: dancing, statues, fighting, Twister, Crazy glue.

Gimmicks:

Leaving someone in a compromising position and quickly freezing the scene before she can move out. As soon as the beginning of the freeze is heard assume a random bizarre position for no reason.

Variations:

Blind freeze: The players line up in order of who is going to take the next position. The next player in faces the back and cannot see the scene as it is progressing. This makes it easier for some actors. Environment freeze: Once the new player has assumed the position of the tagged out player, the audience suggests an environment to base the scene on. Audience freeze: the audience is responsible for yelling freeze and not the players or the host. You can get more info about the “freeze tag” in its *exercise* version.

Delivery Skills:

observing visual cues & body language; accepting; listening; advancing; focusing; action

Foreign Film (handle)

Synonyms:

Dubbing Scene, Subtitles Scene

Introduction:

The following scene is going to be done in a non-existent language called [get language name]. The players on stage will speak only in that language. Luckily there will be players offstage dubbing the scene into English.

Description:

This is essentially a dubbing scene. The foreign film dub is done so often that it requires a note of its own. The players that are acting out the scene in the non-existent language must be very clear

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in defining their environment and making solid physical offers for the translators and audience to work off of. It helps the players that are talking in gibberish to think of what they are saying in English.

Gimmicks:

The standard translation gag is making a really long gibberish sentence and translating it to one English word, or vice versa. Translators can also struggle for the correct English word, caught in gibberish idioms. Translators can also refuse to translate things that are too crude in English, gibberish censoring. These last two gags can really kill a scene (not that all gags don't), and really are just disguised lack of commitment (wimping). Another gag is where the translator rambles on and the gibberish players stop him and end the scene in chaos.

Variations:

Blind dub the scene (translators cannot see the gibberish players. Use a real language. Translate an opera.

Delivery Skills:

observing visual cues & body language; advancing; support; intention

Historical Scene (handle)

Synonyms:

None

Introduction:

This scene will be based on some element of history, either an epoch or an event. [get the historical reference, and be absolutely sure that it is recapped].

Description:

This is a simple formatted story. In any scene where the players are given a framework to play off of the audience expects all the details to be used. In some ways it is an open scene in other ways it is very restricted. Players that are historically challenged can offer environment and support to the other players.

Gimmicks:

None

Variations:

Often the historical scene will be acted out as described in the recap. The scene may be played out as what would have happened if a certain historical event had not happened. The scene may focus on a certain bit player, unknown to history and what she did just before or after the historic event. Epoch scenes (Roman times, Greek culture, Wild West) can be combined with the present world. Historical scenes can get esoteric quickly, and it is important to let the audience know how you are going to alter the 'scene' as it was described.

Delivery Skills:

listening; attention to detail; selectivity; clarity; deduction; references and alternatives

Last Sentence Scene (handle)

Synonyms:

Last Word

Introduction:

This will be an open scene. The only constraints on this scene will be the first sentence and the last sentence of the scene are both chosen by the audience. [get a first sentence and a last sentence from the audience]

Description:

One of the actors must state the first sentence as the first words out of her mouth. Feel free to set up the environment without speaking. Don't be afraid to build into the first sentence. The last sentence of the scene is a bit harder to manage, and it is much better appreciated by the audience. The players must remember that they have only been asked to do two things in the scene, and you are expected to do them.

Gimmicks:

Just say the two sentences and end the scene.

Variations:

First and last word can be used instead. There can also be a middle sentence, or word, that must appear at any time between the first and last sentence/word.

Delivery Skills:

commitment; support; logic; advancing; timing

Machines (handle)

Synonyms:

Factory Scene

Introduction:

In this exercise the players must create the parts of an imaginary machine. Each player will enter one at a time, and offer a repetitive motion and noise to the machine. [get name of a machine]

Description:

The players should use all levels of the stage, and the exercise works best when the motions fit together into some kind of machine. Don't do anything that you cannot physically maintain (one armed push-ups), or something that causes physical pain (dropping to your knees). The players will find that the machine they create reflects the suggestion that they were given.

Gimmicks:

It is a rather gimmicky thing, but audiences really love it (once in a while). The host can speed the machine up, and slow it down. You can also make one part/player malfunction. The machine can be destroyed by speeding up into chaos, or slowing down into a frozen heap.

Variations:

This machine can be frozen and used to start a scene based on the original suggestion.

Delivery Skills:

accepting; observing visual cues; listening; support; justification; cooperation; action

One Word at a Time (handle)

Synonyms:

Word At A Time, Sentence At A Time, Word At A Time Expert

Introduction:

In this scene two players will share the dialogue. Each player may only contribute one word at a time, the other player must then contribute the next word. Together they will build sentences and act out the story that they tell. [try to get an ask-for that has an activity]

Description:

Knowledge of basic grammar is an asset in this scene. The two players must be really capable of sharing the dialogue. Word wars, or driving, by one player will wreck things quickly. Physically it is recommended to join together and act out the scene simultaneously. Going up the stairs together, and washing the cat together.

Gimmicks:

Bring in another character that is composed of two people.

Variations:

There is really no limit to the number of people that can speak in one voice. Usually if there is more than three, the players sit down and are considered an expert of some sort. One word at a time can be exploited as a “Die Game”. One sentence at a time is good for story building. It is more of an exercise than a handle. Two players can build a story one sentence at a time while the other players act out the story.

Delivery Skills:

sharing; accepting; listening; advancing; flow

Options (handle)

Synonyms:

Umm-Err Scene, Shopping List, Roller-Coaster, What Happens Next?

Introduction:

At various points in this scene the actors will be asked to freeze. At that point we will ask you [audience] for some vital piece of information from the story. The players must immediately incorporate the suggestion into the scene.

Description:

The players simply go about the scene as they normally would. Like all “freeze games” it is important to hold position when the freeze is called. Attempt to incorporate the suggestion immediately into the scene. The less one thinks about it the easier it is, and the more appreciated by the audience. The goal of the players is to keep the scene sane and on track while rationalizing the distracters. The ask-fors can be words, emotions, secrets, props, physical ailments, genres, etc.

Gimmicks:

Pretty gimmicky already I think.

Variations:

If the audience is particularly destructive, it might be worth while getting a list of suggestions that are called out by the host. This game is often called shopping list. A roller coaster is the same as a shopping list, except that all of the suggestions are along the same track: all genres, all restaurant types, all textiles, all occupations, etc. An Umm Err scene is just an option scene where the players ask for a suggestion, by pausing and saying “umm..err”, and the audience suggests the player's dialogue. In “What Happens Next?”, the players are frozen and the audience is asked what happens next in the scene.

Delivery Skills:

accepting; shifting focus; justification; logic; action

Paper Chase (handle)

Synonyms:

Sentences, Papers, Order Forms, Scraps

Introduction:

During this scene the players must occasionally stop and introduce sentences that written on these little pieces of paper that are scattered all around the stage. The sentences written on the papers are unknown to the players, and the conductor. They must immediately incorporate the sentence into the scene as it is written on the page. [set up involves getting someone to write out some sentences that will be incorporated in to the scene. Getting the audience to write them out is a nice touch]

Description:

This is a scene just like any other. It is most similar to an “Options” scene, in that there are offers interjected throughout the scene. Don't worry about stooping to pick up the suggestions. Make sure that you don't spend any noticeable time looking over the sentence. It only appears that you are concocting an easy way out for yourself. Audience members really notice if their particular sentence is sidestepped around.

Gimmicks:

Blank pieces of paper. Sentences in other languages. Pictures.

Variations:

Activities can be substituted for sentences.

Delivery Skills:

accepting; timing; commitment; shifting focus; logic

Should Have Said (handle)

Synonyms:

None

Introduction:

Anytime during this scene the players can be interrupted by you [audience]. If at anytime you don't like what they have said you make them change their sentence by yelling, 'should have said.' It is important to give the players a chance to build a story, but if you don't like the way that it is going then yell, 'should have said.'

Description:

Build a scene like any other. Give a bit of extra pause between your comments to allow for the audience to interject. Listen closely for the audience's input. They will hear the 'should have said.' If you miss one expect to be eaten alive. When you are expected to change what you said make a strong choice that alters the course of the scene. They have yelled it because they don't like what is happening, so change the way the scene is going.

Gimmicks:

Replace long drawn out comments with short ones.

Variations:

The callers can be limited to one or two audience members if chaos is imminent.

Delivery Skills:

listening; adapting; commitment; focusing

Sit, Stand, Kneel, Lie Down (handle)

Synonyms:

Compromising Positions, Positions

Introduction:

This scene will have four players. At no time can the players occupy the same position on the stage simultaneously. One player must be lying down, another player must be standing, and so on. If two players are occupying the same position, let them know about it.

Description:

Complete chaos is the best description of this game. All four players should get into the scene rather quickly. This helps work the gimmick, and makes things the most challenging for the players. Try to create a story. Try to justify why you have changed position. Try not to hurt yourself. Change position often, but justify the change. If you can telegraph the move to the other players the whole scene will benefit.

Gimmicks:

Force one person to maintain a position (tie them up, kill them, nail them to their chair), and then make them justify a change.

Variations:

As many positions as wanted can be added. Sit, stand, kneel, lie-down, curl-up, etc.

Delivery Skills:

observing visual cues; sharing; justification; advancing; anticipating; action

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Slide Show (handle)

Synonyms:

Slides, Frames, Pictures

Introduction:

In slide show the players will be freezing into positions one after another while the presenter justifies each 'slide' and tells a story.

Description:

This game is done best with lighting cues for the position changes. Each time the lighting drops, the players on stage scramble into a new position. When the light comes up the presenter (usually just off stage miming a controller) must justify the new positions that the players have taken on. Slide show will be stronger if the presenter identifies a lead character, and resolves each slide around the lead character. Don't be afraid to endow players in the slide as inanimate objects like trees or lamps. The players that make up the slides should keep a few things in mind. Everyone does not need to be in every slide. If the story is going in a certain direction try to continue with the story. Save the crazy positions for later in the scene, or when the scene is dying. The players need to support the presenter, and listen to the presenter. Eventually a story will be told and the slide show will end.

Gimmicks:

The players on stage can get into stranger and stranger positions. All the players can run off stage leaving a blank stage. The players can keep the same position slide after slide. The presenter can comment that a slide is in backwards or upside down, or out of focus requiring the players to accommodate the slide.

Variations:

Usually this is a travel monologue with photos. Slide show could just as easily be a series of wedding photos, an instruction manual, or pictures of a birthday party.

Delivery Skills:

observing visual cues; sharing; justification; advancing; support; action

Split Environments (handle)

Synonyms:

Shared Worlds

Introduction:

In this scene two players will be in the same scene, however each player will believe that is a different environment. If one player believes that she is in an air traffic control tower, she will respond to everything that the other player does as if she were in an air traffic control tower. However the other player might believe that he is in a batting cage. [get two contrasting and physical environments]

Description:

In this scene the two players interact as described. Each must maintain his/her reality as strongly

as possible, and react to what the other player does as if it were their reality. If the player that is in the batting cage says, 'okay let them fly.' The player in the air traffic control tower might give clearance for take-off. If the player in the air traffic control tower types at her console, the other player might think that she is doing special pre-batting finger warm-ups. Etc. It is a very hard scene to do. There are enormous payoffs when the players listen, accept and advance within their own well defined environments.

Gimmicks:

None

Variations:

None. I have never seen this done with more than two players.

Delivery Skills:

maintaining integrity; listening; accepting; advancing; focusing; logic; adapting

Stage Directions (handle)

Synonyms:

Directors Scene

Introduction:

In this scene each player will be supplying the other player's actions in the form of stage directions. Each time a player supplies a line the other player in the scene will supply that player's action in the form of a stage direction.

Description:

This scene is good for ensuring that players that don't give themselves activities on stage are endowed with them. The usual form goes like this. Player one says, "hello there Jill." Player two immediately follows with, "she said running her fingers through her hair." Player one then runs her fingers through her hair in response to the stage direction. This continues through out the entire scene. There is obvious potential for massive pimping. "she said doing an interpretive dance." If that becomes necessary in a scene then try and leave it until the end.

Gimmicks:

Absurd stage directions, endowing physical traits, or emotions.

Variations:

Stage directions are given by players offstage, who may or may not be able to see the players on-stage.

Delivery Skills:

listening; accepting; advancing; support; justification; action

Subconscious Scene (handle)

Synonyms:

Telepathy Scene

Introduction:

The players in this scene will reveal to you their innermost secrets by letting you in on their subconscious thoughts.

Description:

At certain points in the scene the players break from their regular dialogue, and turn to the audience and let them in on their subconscious thoughts. These may be conflicting to those that the player is portraying on stage, or they may reveal further information that helps advance the scene. This subconscious information should be employed by the other players in a subtle fashion. This is similar to a “soliloquy” scene.

Gimmicks:

None

Variations:

The subconscious voices can be played out by players offstage that may or may not (blind subconscious scene) be able to see the scene. The players can play each other's subconscious as well.

Delivery Skills:

listening; focusing; justification; intention

Super Hero Eulogy (handle)

Synonyms:

Eulogy

Introduction:

We are all saddened by the recent demise of our local superhero [get the name of a superhero that doesn't exist]. Some of her friends are gathered here today to pay their last respects.

Description:

Several players get up and tell what they know about the deceased superhero. There is a common pattern of someone knowing her before she developed her powers, a family member, her arch villain, and eventually her demise. The audience likes to hear how the superhero met her fate. It makes it easier for the players if this is left to the last speaker. The previous structure is just an example for those who have not seen the eulogy done before. It might be obvious to most, but doing a eulogy about a real person usually just brings the audience down.

Gimmicks:

None

Variations:

None

Delivery Skills:

listening; advancing; support

Touch To Talk (handle)

Synonyms:

None

Introduction:

The only time that players are allowed to talk during this scene is when they are physically touching each other.

Description:

This scene is meant to build non-verbal communication skills in the players. There certainly can be a fun scene in it as well. It is no fun to cheat and hold hands for the whole scene for no particular reason. There must be solid reasons for making physical contact within the context of the scene. Only speak during those brief moments of physical contact.

Gimmicks:

Averting someone's touch.

Variations:

Touch to shut up. The players have to talk constantly until they make physical contact somehow (an exercise to show how irritating constant blabbering can be).

Delivery Skills:

observing visual cues & body language; justification; advancing; logic; action

Typewriter Scene (handle)

Synonyms:

Word Processing, Author Sketch

Introduction:

In this scene one player will be typing out a story. As characters are introduced players will join in and act out the story. Occasionally they will add dialogue to the story.

Description:

The typist/author usually sits aside from the other players and starts to type out a story. Everyone appreciates it if the typist bothers to mime typing as he speaks. As the scene progresses the players acting out the scene share more and more with the typist that drives the scene. Ideally they will share the advancement of the story, switching from the typist to the players when he slows, and back again once the players slow.

Gimmicks:

This game is wrought with internal gimmicks. Obviously the typist can pimp the players mercilessly. If this becomes the point of the game, i.e., the story has been lost, then it is recommended to start with little pimps and up the stakes later. The typist can also stop things and rewrite scenes.

Variations:

This can be played as a “switch” game where everyone has a chance to be a typist.

Delivery Skills:

listening; accepting; advancing; justification; support; logic; action

EXERCISES

“Exercises” are improvisational structures that have a place more in the workshop than they do on the stage. Each exercise has some specific improvisational rule that it exemplifies in order to develop basic skills. Exercises often break other improvisational rules so that players can focus on certain aspects of their craft.

1-2-3-4 (exercise)

Synonyms:

One Sentence, ABC, Where-Who-What

Introduction:

This exercise covers the basic framework of an open scene. It is very structured and requires three people. One person sets up a scene.

Description:

This exercise is very structured. Each player in it has a specific role, and each sentence spoken has a specific role. It is crucial to emphasize that each step represents only one sentence. It is recommended to talk the players through this the first through times.

ZERO - environment

Player ONE comes on stage and creates an environment based on the set up of the scene. The environment is created in silence through mime. Once she has clearly defined her environment the second player comes on stage. For the sake of this explanation a kitchen is created.

ONE - relationship

Player two comes on stage and he accepts the environment that the first player defined through her mime. The second player contributes only one sentence to the scene and NO more. That sentence simply defines a relationship between the two players. For example, “Hi Mom” would suffice.

TWO - conflict

The first player in the scene then speaks only one sentence. This sentence creates a conflict based on the ask-for, environment, or relationship. For instance “you are late for dinner” is a simple choice.

THREE - raising the stakes

Player two now has a chance to speak his second sentence. This sentence accepts all of the previous elements of the story, and makes the conflict worse. “That’s because I hate your cooking Mom” would certainly be a sentence that advances the story by making the conflict worse.

FOUR - resolution

The two players have to stop talking. (Keep in mind that this is an exercise and not a scene). The third player now enters the scene, accepts the environment and speaks his singular sentence. This sentence will end the scene and resolve the conflict at hand. The resolution must somehow incorporate elements from the scene that went before. For example, “Hi honey, hi son, lets all go eat at McSweeney’s tonight.”

That is the end of the exercise and another three players get set up to do another one. They usually take about one to two minutes each.

Gimmicks:

None

Variations:

If players cannot keep to one sentence. Try doing the steps in gibberish or have someone offstage speak the player's sentence.

Delivery Skills:

accepting; table-setting; relationship-building; conflict-management; creating a sense of urgency; providing resolution; timing

Conducted Story (exercise)

Synonyms:

Directed Story, Story Orchestra, Die Game

Introduction:

Let's get four or five players in a line and one person to conduct a story.

Description:

The goal of the conducted story is to have the players tell a story that moves seamlessly from one player to another. The goal of the conductor is to make the story flow as well as possible. If the conductor moves from one player to another the new player that is speaking must continue on as though there was no pause. For instance, moves from player ONE who said, "many children were afraid of Carl for he was known to ha.." to player TWO, who would continue seamlessly "..ve piles of library books that were overdue." The key is listening. It is a listening exercise. The four players that are not speaking must be listening. They all must have the next word ready to go, and only if they are listening will that word make any sense. The players must also be accepting of what is happening in the story. Forcing their own agenda will show up quickly. Words like, 'but' and 'instead of' reflect someone denies another players offers. The conductor does not try to foul the players up like in the "Die Game" which is the performance version of the conducted story.

Gimmicks:

Hold on one player for a long time.

Variations:

Give each of the players a genre the impact the story when it comes to them. Try the story in gibberish.

Delivery Skills:

listening; accepting; advancing; sharing; flow

Freeze-Tag (exercise)

Synonyms:

Clap, Freeze, Switch, Tag

Introduction:

Everybody up in a line. The first two players start some shared physical activity.

Description:

At any time during the two person scene that is taking place someone calls out freeze. The two players immediately stop what they are doing and 'freeze' into whatever positions that they were in when the 'freeze' was called. The next player in the line immediately tags one of the players that is frozen on stage and assumes their exact position. For the *exercise* freeze, as opposed to the performance *handle* "freeze", the player must assume the *exact* physical position of the player they chose to tag out. This ensures that the player was paying attention to the physical detail of the scene as opposed to just the words. They must be listening with their eyes. Once they assume the position they must start a whole new scene that justifies the position that they are in. This scene must be completely different from the preceding one. This means that they must be paying attention to the scene, so as to assure that their new scene is completely different. If the player breaks any of these rules stop the exercise and give a note. It is also a good idea to put a moratorium on those activities that can be called upon which justify any position: fighting, dancing, adhesive accidents, painting models, store mannequins etc.

Gimmicks:

Don't call freeze and let a scene continue. This is good for catching those players that are in for the short gag.

Variations:

See the handle "freeze games" for all kinds of variations. It can also be good to randomly pick players from the workshop as opposed to the next person in line. This ensures that everyone is paying attention to the scene at hand.

Delivery Skills:

observing visual cues; listening; attention to detail; shifting focus; justification; action

Gibberish (exercise)

Synonyms:

None

Introduction:

This exercise will help us get out of worrying about what we sound like and explore accents. Everyone up in a circle.

Description:

Once in the circle the one of the players turns to their left and greets their neighbor in a gibberish tongue. That player responds with a gibberish 'hello' that mimics the other player. That player turns around and greets the next in the circle and so on. Once the gibberish greeting has gone around the whole circle the gibberish gets embellished. For instance, all the gibberish could be sad gibberish, or happy gibberish, Italian gibberish, Scottish gibberish, Cantonese gibberish,

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Computer gibberish. The gibberish can also be used to communicate intent like, 'used car sales' gibberish, 'pick up line' gibberish. The goal is get people communicating emotions and concepts without depending on words. If going around the circle gets boring the exercise can be combined with the exercise "Cross Circle" to get the players moving.

Gimmicks:

Pheromone and telepathy gibberish

Variations:

On/off gibberish is an exercise where the players switch from gibberish to their native tongue when called to do so from off stage. Translating gibberish has one person assigned to translating another's gibberish.

Delivery Skills:

intention; listening; accepting; justification

Help Desk (exercise)

Synonyms:

None

Introduction:

Can we get one person up to act as a help desk clerk in a major department store.

Description:

Once the person at the info desk is in place the players approach the desk and ask for things that one might find in a department store. They are expected to make strong character choices, and make enquiries related to their characters. Ensure that each player draws from physicality, voice and intent to create their character. The help desk person is neutral and helpful to all the players that come along.

Gimmicks:

None

Variations:

Personnel manager hiring a string of different people, mountain guru offering advice to passing wisdom seekers.

Delivery Skills:

maintaining integrity; listening; accepting; commitment; support; intention; logic

Machine Parts (exercise)

Synonyms:

None

Introduction:

This exercise is designed to help players work together and develop physical cooperation.

Description:

A machine that does not exist is called for and the players create the machine by each adding an

essential part. There is no discussion amongst the players before starting. The first player starts with a repetitive activity and an associated noise. The next players add to the machine with some activity that fits into the previous player's activity. This continues until a machine is created. The machine is sped up and slowed down. Certain players can be asked to malfunction, and the whole machine must respond. There is no leader in the creation of the machine. It is important that all the players reflect the changes in each part of the machine.

Gimmicks:

There are many gimmicks listed with the performance handle “Machines”.

Variations:

None

Delivery Skills:

accepting; observing visual cues; listening; support; justification; cooperation; action

Mirrors (exercise)

Synonyms:

None

Introduction:

Everyone into pairs for an exercise that trains sharing focus, taking focus and physical listening.

Description:

One of the players in the pair begins to gradually move. The other player mirrors the movements of the other player. Initially one player is leading the other and then the lead switches. Eventually there is no way to tell which player is leading the exercise the focus is being shared rather than taken by one player or the other. The object is not to screw up the other player, but to make the reality of the mirror the priority.

Gimmicks:

Try a kaleidoscope with three or more players all mirroring actions in a circle.

Variations:

Sounds can be mirrored as well.

Delivery Skills:

observing visual cues; sharing; cooperation; role reversal; support; justification; action

Silent Scene (exercise)

Synonyms:

None

Introduction:

This is a silent scene. The players will set up an open scene, but there will be no talking during the scene.

Description:

What more can be said. The common pitfalls in the silent scene include using frequent gesticulations, lip reading, and pointing to get concepts across. It is not a charades scene, it is a silent scene. Everything thing is the same as any other scene, except the information is conveyed without speaking aloud.

Gimmicks:

None

Variations:

This scene can work great as a handle in any show.

Delivery Skills:

observing visual cues & body language; intention; support; justification; cooperation; action; using virtual props & space

So I Will (exercise)

Synonyms:

What you are saying is that...

Introduction:

Everyone into a circle for a very structured one sentence at a time story.

Description:

This exercise forces listening and gets players taking smaller, more logical steps with their story building. It also helps players when they draw a blank in a performance setting. The first player makes any kind of statement. For instance, "It is a lovely day out." The next player in the line says, "WHAT YOU ARE SAYING IS THAT--It is a lovely day out, SO I WILL--go for a walk." The goal is to say the next most logical thing in the story. The next player would say "WHAT YOU ARE SAYING IS THAT--I'll go for a walk, SO I WILL--get my shoes." The story that builds should be a logical one. It will not be a story that will win Pulitzer prizes, but it will make sense. This is a great way of combating troupes that are suffering from 'offer suffocation' in their shows.

Gimmicks:

None

Variations:

None

Delivery Skills:

accepting; listening; advancing; attention to detail; support; justification; logic; flow;

Touch It (exercise)

Synonyms:

None

Introduction:

This is an environment building exercise that helps players work on making the environment part of their story.

Description:

This is essentially an open scene. At any time that the players are not using their environment, or they are becoming talking heads, someone calls out 'touch it'. At that point the players must interact with their environment in some fashion. This could be picking up a coffee cup, moving a chair, or lighting a candle. The call to 'touch it' can be directed at players that are blabbing too much. The players should limit the environment and not create many new things out of thin air.

Gimmicks:

None

Variations:

None

Delivery Skills:

using virtual props & space; accepting; observing visual cues; listening; support; justification

Word At A Time (exercise)

Synonyms:

None

Introduction:

This exercise works on the shared process of building a story together. Everyone into a circle.

Description:

Each player in the circle contributes only ONE word to the story. If the first person to speak says "Johnny" the next person could say, "set", the next person could say "out". And so on. There is more information about this exercise in the handle "one-word-at-a-time". The word at a time story should make sense. The players need to be listening to the story as it develops. Instead of offering the witty word that will make everyone laugh, they should add the next most logical word. This exercise takes control away from those players that tend to drive scenes. If sentences are going on too long allow any of the players in the circle to call out "period" to end a sentence. Banning "and" or "but" are good ways to limit things and lead the group to form full sentences.

Gimmicks:

None

Variations:

None

Delivery Skills:

accepting; advancing; listening; support; justification; focusing

Yes, And (exercise)

Synonyms:

None

Introduction:

This exercise emphasizes over accepting and supporting other players on stage. Two people up.

Description:

The players are constantly saying, 'yes and'. The mechanism goes something like this. One player may start off with, "All coats should be made of wool." The response of the other player could be, "YES AND they should be loose-fitting." The other player responds, "YES AND they should be dark-colored." "YES AND they should be waterproof." The players must always have the 'yes and' at the beginning of their sentence. This seems contrived and it is. It is remarkable how much easier it is to notice players that insist on controlling the scene. They cannot bring themselves to accept the offer. The most common response is, "yes and but."

Gimmicks:

None

Variations:

There is the opposite version called, 'yes but'

Delivery Skills:

accepting; sharing; listening; support; justification; cooperation; relationship-building

Yes, But (exercise)

Synonyms:

None

Introduction:

This exercise emphasizes alternative support while contradicting other players on stage. While two people can play, this works better with four up.

Description:

The players are constantly saying, "yes but". The mechanism goes something like this (assuming four players). Player One may start off with, "All coats should be made of wool." The response of the player two is, "YES, BUT wool is so expensive." The third player responds, "YES, BUT wool is more durable and worth the price." The fourth player says, "YES, BUT a down jacket is just as durable and half the price." The players must always have the 'yes but' at the beginning of their sentence. Notice that alternating players support each other, while contradicting the prior one (player three agrees with player one, four with two). The challenge in this exercise is that all players must keep track of two lines of logic or both sides of an issue.

Gimmicks:

None

Variations:

There is a version called, 'yes but'

Delivery Skills:

conflict-management; accepting; listening; support; justification; focusing

ASK-FORS

Ask-fors are what separates improvisational theatre from all other forms of theatre. The barrier between the audience and the players is broken down by *asking* the audience what they want the next scene to be about. Extracting that information is a skill in itself. Every troupe has its own style of asking for audience suggestions. The approach suggested here is a neutral one aimed at a slightly neophyte or recalcitrant audience.

Tell the audience that the show is improvised ahead of time. If they have no idea that you are going to be hitting them up for suggestions even the rudest audience knows to not interact with the actors on stage. Be polite and thank the audience member for the suggestion. Qualify that the scene will somehow involve the audience members suggestion, but it does not need to involve the specific "ask-for" as stated.

THE SUPER-LONG LIST OF ASK-FORS

- | | | |
|--|--|--|
| 1. Can I have a relationship between two people? | 14. Fill in the blank.
The -blank- holiday. | 26. Something you wouldn't want to swallow. |
| 2. Name a room in a house. | 15. What is the worst excuse you have heard for missing work (school, church)? | 27. Something you never want to have to tell your grandmother. |
| 3. What did you want to be when you grew up? | 16. Can I get a polysyllabic noun that starts with the letter D (F, G, etc)? | 28. A place where you might run into very unusual people. |
| 4. What am I holding in my hands (hold up hands)? | 17. What is your favorite cereal topping? | 29. If you could invent a new human organ what would it be? |
| 5. What is the opposite of the color (blue)? | 18. Where is a bad place to take a date? | 30. If god were an atheist what would god have called religion? |
| 6. May I get an occupation that involves no risk of physical injury? | 19. Fill in the blanks.
For every -blank- there are seven -blanks-. | 31. If you could work at a Federal Penitentiary what job would you choose? |
| 7. May I get a backyard activity? | 20. A poor choice of collateral. | 32. What animal does your spouse remind you of? |
| 8. What are you planning to do on your next day off? | 21. Can I get a crucial moment in history? | 33. Why would make you limp for the rest of the day? |
| 9. Can I get a non-geographical location? | 22. If you could defy any natural law, what would it be? | 34. Name three high-stress occupations. |
| 10. What is your uncle's favorite hobby? | 23. What does it take to wake you up in the morning? | 35. What three books would take to another planet? |
| 11. Fill in the blank.
The -blank- family. | 24. What would be the eleventh commandment? | |
| 12. What is a lame excuse for avoiding a speeding ticket? | 25. Give me a problem that needs solving. | |

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