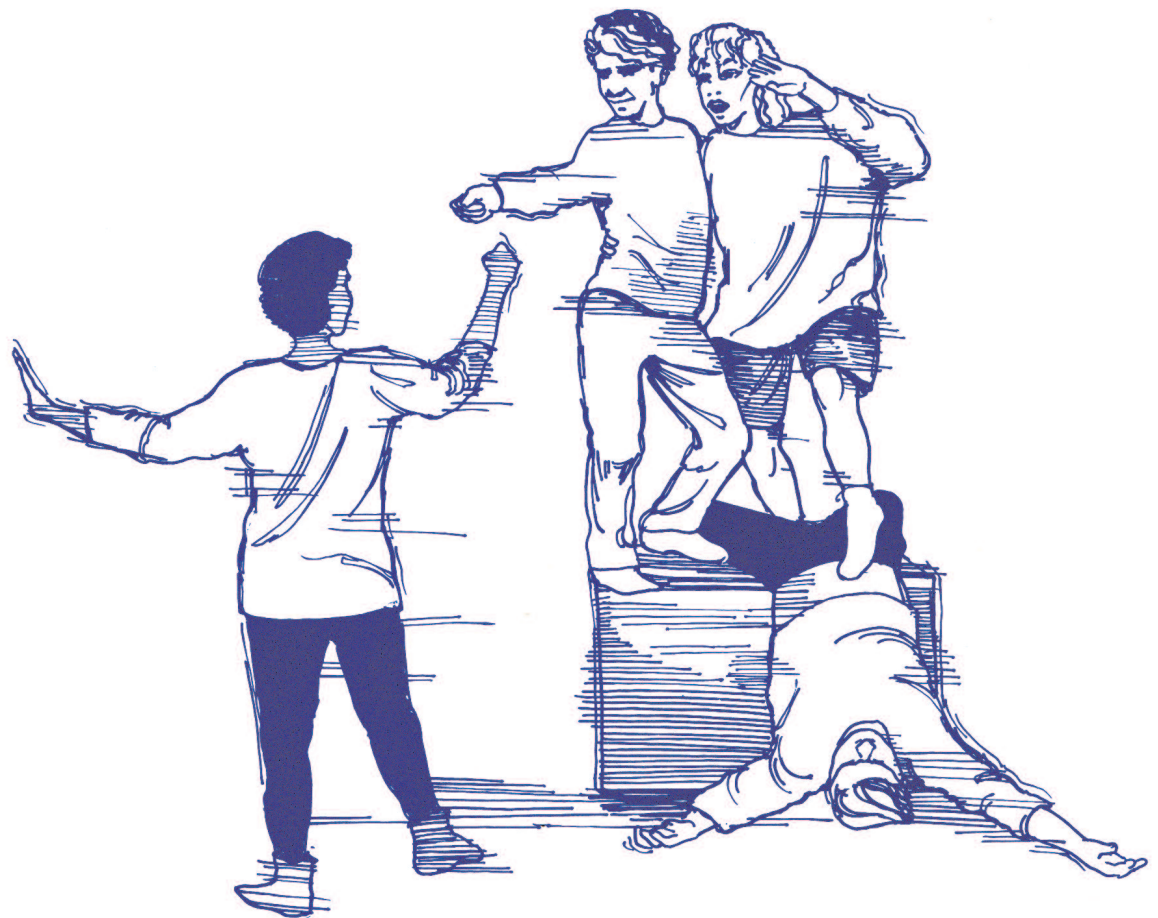


Theatre Video Series

Introduction to:
“Creative Drama & Improvisation”
Teacher's Guide

F648



To the Teacher:

You are doing important work. The teaching of drama is central to the education of young people. The arts are basic to learning; no discipline can better help us understand who we are, who we have been, and who we will become.

You are probably very good at wearing many hats. It's likely you have friends who think you're crazy for working the hours you do. You may or may not feel you have enough specialized training in the teaching of all areas of drama, and yet everyone looks to you as the expert. It is our hope that this video tape and guide will assist you in your work.

The tape is designed to be participatory; turn it off and try these exercises with your class. Your students have encountered enough "talking heads" on TV to last them a lifetime. The real learning will come from the doing.

This guide has been designed for you. In addition to this cover letter, the guide contains:

- an outline of the video
- notes on each of the exercises
- a sample quiz and answer key
- an annotated bibliography

The extensive notes are designed to clarify each exercise. They contain questions for discussion and strategies for learning. The annotated bibliography contains the resources worth taking to the proverbial desert island. The students on this tape will serve as some of your most powerful allies. They will help you teach by example as they model a genuine love for the theatre, a concern for each other and a willingness to risk appearing the fool in order to grow. It took a lot of pizza, but it was a joy to work with them in the making of this tape. The tape and guide are a smorgasbord. Not all of it will look good to everybody; help yourself to that which looks best to you. Good luck to you and your students.

Best Wishes,



Rives B. Collins
Assistant Professor
Northwestern University

SECTION ONE: CREATIVE DRAMA DEFINED

A) DEFINITION

Creative Drama is defined as an improvisational, non-exhibitional, processed-centered form of drama in which players are guided by a leader to imagine, enact and reflect upon human experience. The primary purpose is to facilitate learning by the participants rather than create a performance for an audience.

B) HOUSE TOURS

This exercise was included to illustrate the properties of creative drama. The work was improvised. The players created simultaneously, so there was no emphasis on performing for an audience. They worked with each other to imagine the homes as they experienced the tour together. Discussion questions allowed the group to reflect on the improvisation they created.

The tours happened simultaneously with each pair focusing on their own work. We agreed upon a freeze symbol (taubourine), and used a "spotlighting" technique in which I asked one pair to continue their work and allow us to listen in. I encouraged the players to work to imagine the worlds they were in vividly. Tours usually last 5-8 minutes, and then the players reverse roles and a new tour begins.

Variation #1 -- Create house tours of a fantasy, dream house. Money is no object. Create any home you like.

Variation #2 -- Create house tours of the home you lived in when you were a child. Imagine the home has become a museum because you are now famous (infamous?). Conduct the tour as a curator might, speaking of yourself in the third person.

Variation #3 -- Create house tours of a fictitious character, perhaps a character in a play. Take your guests to the places that are important.

For Discussion:

- Do you agree with Swiss psychologist Carl Jung that our homes are extensions of ourselves?
- How did it feel to take someone through your world? How did it feel to be a guest?
- Which parts of the tour were most vivid? What were you able to imagine fully?
- What did you discover about yourselves and about each other? If appropriate, what did you learn about the character you were portraying?

Note: A version of House Tours was first shared with us by visiting professor Cecily O'Neill at the summer drama institute at Northwestern University in 1987.

SECTION TWO: DRAMATIC PLAY IN CHILDHOOD

This segment explores the natural, universal tendency of children to engage in make-believe play. We began sharing stories of our own memories of what we played as children. Sometimes I ask students to have this discussion in pairs or in small groups so that everyone has a chance to share. The discussion is always accompanied by laughter, but it may also be the first time students consider the real importance of their make-believe play. A paradox is revealed -- our play is unique to each of us, yet we all played in similar ways for similar reasons. Dramatic play allowed us:

- to imitate those we observed
- to reverse situations and try on adult roles
- to experiment with solutions to problems
- to release unacceptable impulses without real world consequences

An exercise presented by sports psychologists to demonstrate the effect of the imagination on the body -- a physiological response to an inner image.

Suggested side coaching:

- Loop a piece of thread through a paper clip and pinch thread between thumb and forefinger to create a pendulum. Anchor your elbow on desktop or knee and allow the clip to hang freely. Do not try to make anything happen, just listen to my voice and see the suggested images in your mind's eye.
- Imagine the paper clip swinging in an even wider arc. See it swinging in a wider arc. Even wider. See it swinging in a wider arc.
- Imagine the paper clip swinging in a circle. Imagine it swinging in a perfect circle. See it swinging in an even larger circle.
- See it stop. See the paper clip hanging motionless in the air. See it hanging motionless in the air. Imagine it stopped.

For Discussion:

- What happened for each of you during the exercise? Everyone has their own experience of this, there is no way to do it wrong.
- In addition to being a great party trick, what are the implications of this exercise for students of the theatre? How might the imagination be used to affect performance?

D) COLORS EXERCISE

This exercise simply involves the imagining of colors in sequence -- Red, Orange, Yellow, Green, Blue, Purple, White. In addition to being very relaxing, it offers a first step in the ability to select and control imagined images. It can be done regularly, at the beginning or end of class as a warm-up/cool-down or centering exercise.

For Discussion:

- How did you receive the colors?
- What are the implications of this exercise for students of the theatre?

E) UNFINISHED DREAMS

This exercise is designed to allow students to tap into their inner well-springs of imagination and creativity. In this section we compared *convergent thinking* to *divergent thinking*. Whereas convergent thinking may rule out possibilities and lead to a single "right" answer, divergent thinking will lead us to multiple correct solutions. Convergent thinking (important at times) is rigid; divergent thinking is characterized by fluency and flexibility. Divergent thinking is highly valued in the creative process.

The unfinished dream exercise clearly has no single correct response. Ask players to have a blank page and pencil handy. Invite them to relax, close their eyes and *imagine*.

Suggested side-coaching for the dreams:

- 1) You are in your own house having breakfast. There is a knock at the door. You go to it, open it, but nobody is there. You go back to your breakfast. There is a knock at the door. You go to it, open it, but nobody is there. You go back to your breakfast. There is a knock at the door. You go to it, open it, but nobody is there. You go back to your breakfast. There is a knock at the door. You decide not to open it. But

- to experience real feelings in imagined situations
- to develop socially as we played with others
- to have fun!

For excellent insights into value of make-believe I strongly recommend Dramatic Play: Rehearsal for Life by Virginia Koste (see bibliography).

A) TABLEAUX

Invite students in small groups to create frozen scenes of important moments from their dramatic play. Share the tableaux and guide with the observers to make discoveries about dramatic play.

B) SCENES

On the tape you see the students creating scenes of dramatic play. The scenes were based either on actual memories of make-believe play or on a composite of real memories. The challenge was to capture the spirit, spontaneity and honesty of pretend play. Basing the scenes on real memories helps the players avoid playing stereotypes and gain insights into themselves.

For Discussion:

- Think about why dramatic play is so important for children. Compare these to reasons why adults create and enjoy theatre.
- How is the work of kids playing make-believe like the work of actors in the theatre? How is it different?
- What can actors learn from the make-believe they once enjoyed as children?

SECTION THREE: THE CREATIVE PROCESS

I. IMAGINATION

A) INTRODUCTION

Discuss the following quotes:

"Imagination is more powerful than knowledge."

Albert Einstein

"The problems of the world cannot possibly be solved by skeptics or cynics whose horizons are limited by the obvious realities. We need people who can dream of things that never were."

President John F. Kennedy

B) SPORTS PSYCHOLOGY AND IMAGINATION

Sports psychologists, concerned with performance under stressful conditions, highlight the importance of being able to use the imagination to:

- 1) create an image of positive performance
- 2) conduct a mental rehearsal
- 3) relieve tension and relax under stressful conditions

For additional information on this topic I suggest Creative Drama and Imagination: Transforming Ideas into Action by Helene Rosenberg (see bibliography).

C) PAPER CLIP EXERCISE

the knocking continues. You go to it, open it, and there at the doorway is somebody wonderful you never expected to see.

You now have one minute of clock time which is the equivalent of all the time you will need to continue imagining this unfinished dream.

2) You are walking in a dark woods. You have been walking for a long time and you're not sure of the way home. You hear mysterious sounds all around you. It seems to be growing colder. You arrive at a small clearing. You hear the sound of a galloping horse. Into the clearing rides a mysterious figure cloaked in black riding a black horse. The horse rears up on his hind legs and stops. They come slowly toward you. The rider, whose face is concealed, reaches into his cloak and produces a silver chalice. Slowly, very slowly he reaches down from his horse and offers the chalice to you.

You now have one minute of clock time which is the equivalent to all of the time you will need to continue imagining this unfinished dream.

3) You are hiking up a steep mountain. It is hot. You are carrying a very heavy load on your back. The climb is exhausting and you are tempted to turn back. Just when you are sure you can go no farther, you see ahead of you what you have been looking for. You climb to the entrance of a cave and cry out, "I am here." The weight feels heavy on your back. Suddenly to your left you notice a bearded man. He is very old and very wise. He smiles at you.

You now have one minute of clock time which is the equivalent of all the time you will need to continue imagining this unfinished dream.

These dreams may be presented individually or in sequence. Ask players to return to the page and begin writing. All work should be non-verbal at this point. They may write about anything they choose—perhaps about a memory. But they should begin writing without planning. Keep the pencil moving across the page. Do not erase or cross anything out. Do not go back and re-read anything you have written. Keep the pencil moving. Just write.

After 5-10 minutes of writing I invite the group to share anything they would like. Sometimes people share the piece they wrote, others talk about the process of imagining. Sometimes it is a good idea to share with a partner first, then bring everyone together as a whole group. It may be helpful to reassure the group that it is normal for everyone to have varying degrees of response to the dreams and that everybody responds differently depending on the day. There is simply no wrong answer to this question. The sharing is a celebration of the richness of everyone's imaginations.

For Discussion:

- How was this process like having a dream?
- Many creative people keep dream journals by their bedside, often recording their dreams as soon as they wake up. Why do you think they do this?
- How might this kind of dream-like thinking be important for students of the theatre?

Note: A version of Unfinished Dreams was first shared with us by visiting professors Jim Hancock and Susan Zeder at the summer drama institute of Northwestern University in 1989.

II. CONCENTRATION, MOVEMENT, AWARENESS OF OTHERS

A) EXPLOSION TAG

A lucid explanation of this game can be found in Viola Spolin's Theatre Games for the Classroom (see bibliography). This is a great energizer. The game gets especially interesting when you explore its variations.

- Explode with your whole body

- Make noise when you explode
- How many different ways can we find to explode? (graceful, goofy, athletic...)
- Explode in slow motion
- Instant replay! Everyone copies the exploder

For Discussion:

- Ideally, the act of exploding is a spontaneous one at the moment of being tagged. To paraphrase the folks at NIKE, you "Just do it."
- Were you able to play without thinking too much?
- How is this concept significant for students of the theatre?

B) WILLOW IN THE WIND

A delightful explanation of this game can be found in the New Games Handbook (see bibliography). More than an anthology of games, New Games presents a philosophy of community-building play. Play Hard (commit to what you're doing), Play Fair (play by mutual agreement), Nobody Hurt (the players matter more than the outcome of the game)—these principles create a very sane atmosphere for playing and creating together.

This game is one of many in the New Games Handbook that involves an element of risk. An emphasis on *safety* is essential to the success of the work, and everyone must accept responsibility for encouraging risk within the context of safety. By giving everyone the power of egress—the ability to exit from an exercise—the group is assured that everyone is choosing to risk.

For Discussion:

- What does an exercise like Willow in the Wind have to offer students of the theatre?
- How is the spirit of this exercise linked to the creative process?

C) MINE FIELD

Variations of this exercise can be found in Brian Way's classic Development Through Drama (see bibliography). There are many ways to create the obstacles—chairs, human beings, pieces of newspaper, coats and bookbags—but however you play, the object must be to create a world fraught with *tension*. Emphasize that in order for the players to solve this problem, the players will need intense concentration and teamwork. When playing in a group, you may want to have more than one player at a time crossing the circle. If a player bumps into a mine, she and her guide are both eliminated from the playing. Emphasize that the responsibility to solve this problem is shared—keep the stakes high for all participating.

For Discussion:

- What did you feel as you worked through this exercise?
- What did it take to solve the problem the mine field posed?
- How was dramatic tension part of the work?
- What does this exercise have to offer students of the theatre?

III. CHARACTERIZATION AND IMPROVISATION

A) CAT WANTS A CORNER

Variations of this children's game are played around the world. One version is presented in Viola Spolin's Theatre Games for the Classroom. We began playing the traditional game and then added complicating elements.

- Slow motion (movement and voice)
- Electric floor (fast motion)
- Ballet/Ice skating
- Aerobic instructor
- Grand Opera
- Rock and roll

- Space creatures (who can't speak English)
- Kindergarten
- Small town cafe

The initial focus of the game was to use the body and voice spontaneously as the game demanded. As the game progressed we began to explore characters in situations.

B) THE DRAMA OF THE SMALL TOWN CAFE

The small town cafe served as an impetus for the creation of an extended improvisation. Here we shifted gears and moved away from the style of theatre games and towards the work of Dorothy Heathcote and Cecily O'Neill.

- 1) Students were invited to play as if in a small town cafe. They were asked what kind of people they might find there, and to play the game in character.
- 2) We played until some characters began to emerge. I asked the group to share with each other what characters they were becoming. We were developing a group awareness of the cast of our drama structure. I encouraged the players to respect the characters they were creating, not lampoon them.
- 3) I joined the group as a radio interviewer (this technique is referred to as teaching-in-role). The characters were asked what they liked best and least about living in a small town. This activity further clarified the characters and setting, and encouraged the players to reflect from within the context of the drama.
- 4) We all stepped out of role to answer the questions (using divergent thinking), "What is our drama about? What themes are emerging as we improvise?"
- 5) We agreed that without *conflict* there is no drama. The group was offered a choice--conflict from an external force or conflict from within. The group chose conflict from within.
- 6) We agreed that conflict from within can divide a community, but I postponed the onset of the divisive conflict by inviting the players to explore the ties which have held them together. In small groups the players were asked to create short scenes which illustrate the strength of the community. We shared the scenes with each other and discussed them.
- 7) We brainstormed the kinds of things which could split up a community (greed, pride, change...), and I asked if there was someone within the group willing to introduce one of these elements of conflict.
- 8) We created a place for the conflict to occur. One person at a time described an element of the cafe. We had a shared understanding of the environment.
- 9) One player introduced the conflict--an innuendo about the conduct of the town minister and a widow who lived on the edge of town. The players spontaneously chose sides and the conflict grew. All of us were startled by the widow's revelation that the minister had been teaching her to read.
- 10) I froze the drama and asked for inner monologues--the thoughts and feelings of each character at the moment.
- 11) We gathered to discuss the drama we had made, looking especially at those elements that are universal in human experience.

Clearly this drama structure was one that we could have developed for a much longer period of time. These may become improvisations which can continue to grow from class period to class period over a span of

weeks. More Drama Structures like this one can be found in Drama Guidelines and in Drama Structures (see bibliography).

SECTION FOUR: CREATIVE DRAMA IN THE REHEARSAL PROCESS

A) WARM-UPS AND REHEARSAL ATMOSPHERE

We discussed the need for warm-ups to free the body, voice and imagination for the work of the rehearsal process. Warm-ups help the players leave their daily concerns behind as they join each other in the creative process. Looking back at the exercises on the tape, we discussed the use of:

- Imagining to relax and center
- Willow in the Wind to develop ensemble
- Explosion Tag and Cat Wants a Corner to free the body and voice, and to help the players arrive at a state of spontaneity and intuition rather than analysis.

For Discussion:

- Professional athletes would never enter competition without stretching out and warming-up. Why is this process so important to their performance?
- How is the warm-up of the actor like that of an athlete? How is it different?

B) COMPANY COMMITMENT TO THE WORLD OF THE PLAY

We discussed the use of creative drama to help the entire company share a commitment to the telling of the same story. We created improvisational scenes which would help us explore the circumstances of a play. In these scenes any actor can play any role, not necessarily the one they may have been cast to portray in the play.

Sample Scenes:

The Glass Menagerie

Students at the stenography school discuss the time Laura threw-up in class.

Death of a Salesman

Colleagues of Willie Lowman discuss the effects of his poor performance on their reputations.

For Discussion:

- How did these improvised scenes help the students understand the world of the play they were exploring?
- What scenes from other plays might help a company commit to the world of the story?

C) CHARACTER ENRICHMENT

We discussed the potential of creative drama to enrich an actor's commitment to the character he/she is developing. House tours were cited as a way to create a special place important to the character. We also discussed the importance of creating significant moments not included in the text of the play.

Example: The Glass Menagerie

Improvised scene in which Laura is given the nickname "Blue Roses" by Jim in high school.

For Discussion:

- Note the irony that the actress who was the most cruel in the earlier improvisation now steps into the shoes of Laura herself. How might this work enrich her understanding of the character and fuel her performance?
- What other moments suggested by the text could be improvised to assist an actor to deepen commitment to the character?

Creative Drama and Improvisation

QUIZ

- 1) True or False. Learning to perform with greater clarity for an audience is an important component of the Creative Drama approach. _____
- 2) True or False. In the Creative Drama approach, improvisation is used as a tool for discovery. _____
- 3) True or False. Questions which require divergent thinking can usually be answered by a single correct response. _____
- 4) True or False. Theatre games encourage you to think carefully before you act. _____
- 5) True or False. The power of egress allows players to not participate. _____
- 6) True or False. The players in improvisational creative drama usually strive to make each other laugh. _____
- 7) True or False. Creative Drama may be used to help us understand that which is universal in human experience. _____
- 8) Which of the following is NOT suggested by sports psychologists as a constructive use of the imagination? The imagination may be used to : a) create a positive mental image; b) reduce tension during stress; c) move paper clips through telekinesis; d) rehearse mentally. _____
- 9) Dramatic play in childhood may have allowed you to: a) try on adult roles; b) release unacceptable impulses without real world consequences; c) learn social skills through interaction with other children; d) have fun; e) all of the above. _____
- 10) Which of the following was not discussed as a use of improvisation in the rehearsal process? a) Improvisation may be used to help actors understand the world of the play; b) Improvisation may be used to help actors memorize lines accurately; c) Improvisation may be used to enrich an actor's understanding of the character he/she is portraying; d) Improvisation may be used to help actors in the warm-up process. _____

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QUIZ KEY

- 1) False
- 2) True
- 3) False
- 4) False
- 5) True
- 6) False
- 7) True
- 8) c - move paper clips through telekinesis
- 9) e - all of the above
- 10) b - improvisation may be used to help actors memorize lines accurately

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