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IMPROVISATION: COLLABORATING TO CREATE SPONTANEOUS PERFORMANCE

WHY STUDY IMPROVISATION?

Improvisation is both an entertaining form of performance and a valuable tool for exploring and developing drama work. Improvisation requires a performer to think quickly and to be inventive and imaginative. It can also make an invaluable contribution to the process of playbuilding because it allows you and other group members to explore character and ideas through action. The improvisation activities in this chapter are excellent preparation for the playbuilding tasks in chapter 4.

This chapter is divided into the following units:

- 2.1 An overview of improvisation
- 2.2 The skills of improvisation
- 2.3 Character types and status in improvisation
- 2.4 Improvisation exercises
- 2.5 Playback Theatre
- 2.6 Performance task: improvisation

OUTCOMES

In this chapter you will:

- explore and utilise the skills of improvisation
- identify the elements of drama and incorporate them in improvisations
- create and sustain character types in improvisations
- contribute and incorporate your own ideas to create improvised performance work
- utilise skills of listening, interpretation and improvisation to 'playback' personal stories.





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Theatresports was created by Keith Johnstone.

2.1 An overview of improvisation

Switch off the no-saying intellect and welcome the unconscious as a friend: it will lead you to places you never dreamed of, and produce results more “original” than anything you could achieve by aiming at originality.

Irving Wardle – Theatre writer



HINT

Improvisation has been used as a training tool in health, employment and education to help participants gain a greater understanding of people and the way they behave.

IMPROVISATION IN PERFORMANCE

Becoming a successful improvisation performer requires the development of skills to create powerful, entertaining and interesting improvisations. Regular practice and evaluation will also encourage:

- the ability to be creative and imaginative spontaneously
- the ability to work cooperatively with other performers
- an understanding of how the elements of drama work together in performance.

Improvisation has been an aspect of many forms of Western and non-Western performance for centuries. During the mid 1960s, improvisation became a very popular tool for training performers and creating performance work. This loose, informal style of theatre reflected the changes in society’s attitudes and values at the time. The Pram Factory in Melbourne and the Nimrod Theatre in Sydney produced plays that reflected the influence of these changes in society and the arts. Writers, performers and directors began to experiment with new forms of theatre. Famous Australian playwrights, such as Jack Hibberd and David Williamson, refined plays that had been developed in workshop improvisations.

When engaged in improvisation, the performer is very ‘audience aware’. Although the performer is focused on being a character in a situation, he or she is constantly aware of audience reactions; these help the performer make the best decisions for the outcome of the performance. An Italian form of comic, improvised performance, known as *commedia dell’arte*, relies on stock character types and improvisation to develop comic moments. *Commedia dell’arte* performers encourage audience reaction by directly playing to the audience.



HINT

Lyn Pierse’s book *Theatresports Down Under* is an excellent reference for improvisation work.

2.2 The skills of improvisation

THE SKILLS OF IMPROVISATION

You can develop a number of skills to improve your effectiveness as an improvisation performer. Although each skill is looked at separately, in performance, all skills are drawn on simultaneously.

As you practise the exercises for each skill, be prepared for your teacher to ‘side coach’ you. Your teacher may encourage you to accept an offer, or to extend or advance a situation. Try to incorporate your teacher’s advice without dropping character or stopping the action. You may find your teacher offers a lot of side coaching when you first try these exercises. As you gain confidence with each skill, your teacher will reduce the amount of side coaching.



Improv Encyclopedia –
Improv Games
Unexpected Productions –
The Living Playbook

PRACTITIONER PROFILE

BRIDIE CONNELL

Performer

Bridie joined her primary school's performing arts club when she was 11 years old, and thoroughly enjoyed dressing up in silly costumes and putting on skits every week. She writes, 'One week, our teacher introduced us to a specialist tutor, who was joining us to talk about something called "improvisation". Well, after getting over my initial fears (there were NO SCRIPTS!) I was hooked. This improv thing was hilarious, challenging and wonderful all at the same time, and I couldn't wait for the next class.'

Although her primary school performing arts club was a long time ago, she still uses improv every day in her life as an actor.

She writes, 'The skills I learnt and continue to develop help performers be fully present, as well as great listeners and problem solvers. I also use improv when I'm trying to write a script—improv is a wonderful starting point for devising a performance, or figuring out a character.'

Improv can be applied to so many situations off stage. Bridie writes, 'My first ever Theatresports coach used to say, "people who learn improv are better at life", and it's true! Improv equips you with skills that are useful in all areas of life. Throughout my time learning improv, I have grown not only as a performer, but a person. My co-performers and I have learnt to work in group situations, to think on our feet (which has definitely come in useful getting out of trouble at school!), to develop our imaginations and confidence and to find the fun in anything!'



Bridie Connell

Photography by Victoria Baldwin

Skill 1: spontaneity

Spontaneity is the ability to 'act on the spot', without hesitation. It requires the performer to provide ideas during performance that help the drama to move forward. The ability to be spontaneous in performance, to act without hesitation, helps maintain the pace and tension of the improvisation.



HINT

Keith Johnstone, author of the well-known book *Improv: Improvisation and the Theatre*, believes that when we improvise, our fears of being rejected or failing make us 'edit' many of our good ideas. This makes us hesitate, therefore interrupting the flow of the performance. He suggests that you 'do' before you think. This is being spontaneous; it will give the most honest and often the most appropriate response.



CHALLENGE

Stand and physically represent the words as you say them by creating a shape with your body. Try increasing the number of people working together. Each person in the group takes a turn calling out a word, and the entire group creates a statue or tableau to represent the word called.



HINT

Reminiscing is fondly remembering the past.

EXERCISE

SPONTANEITY

1 Word association

In pairs, sit opposite each other. In turn, each person says a word in quick succession. The aim is to keep going for as long as possible without laughing or hesitating.

2 Instant *Romeo and Juliet*

In this exercise, a well-known Shakespearean play has been chosen as the basis for some improvised situations. The use of known characters from a known story helps you 'do' without thinking and hesitating. You will act as specific characters from the play in particular situations. Sometimes you will be asked to be an object. You may be required to use voice and sound. Try not to discuss what you do, and aim to complete the task as quickly as possible. Your teacher will give you a time limit of five or ten seconds to complete each activity.

- In pairs, become a chef and assistant chef preparing the food for the Capulet ball. Discuss the menu.
- In groups of eight, create a tableau that shows the opposing families in Verona: the Capulets and Montagues. Two people must represent Juliet (a Capulet) and Romeo (a Montague) showing their opposition to the feud.
- In groups of three, become Mr Montague and two palace cleaners. It is the morning after the ball, and Mr Montague is coping with the mess. The cleaners gossip about Romeo and Juliet.
- In pairs, become Juliet and the nurse. The nurse is reminiscing and giving Juliet advice on love.
- In groups of six, become the balcony on which Juliet stood when talking with Romeo.
- In pairs, become Romeo and Juliet in the balcony scene. Romeo is on the balcony and Juliet has a new and different speech to deliver to Romeo.
- In groups of four, come up with five titles of 'advice' books for Romeo and Juliet.
- Become the friar in his chambers, making his medicines. He tries some medicines on himself, with incredible results.
- In groups of ten, create the interior of the Capulet family tomb. Use sound to heighten the atmosphere.

COLLABORATE AND THINK CRITICALLY

- 1 Talk with your group. Which situations worked best for you? Why?
- 2 Which situations did not work well for you? Why?
- 3 Reflect individually. When did you find it difficult to be spontaneous? Can you remember the sorts of thoughts you had when you hesitated? Can you think of ways to counter the hesitant thoughts?
- 4 Did you tend to initiate in an improvisation or did you wait for others to contribute first? Why?
- 5 Is it more important to lead or to follow? Why?

Skill 2: making offers

Making offers is the ability of the actor to be imaginative, make positive and active contributions to the development of the plot, and establish characters, location and time. An offer may be verbal or physical. An example of a verbal offer is to say, 'Quickly, I think they're on the window ledge!' A physical offer may be a performer using mime to signal to another performer to follow them and walk quietly. Alternatively, a physical offer could be to become an inanimate object that another performer can use.



HINT

A good improvisation actor is always looking for opportunities to make offers that will benefit the overall improvisation.

EXERCISE

MAKING OFFERS

1 Physical offers

In pairs, improvise short scenes in which one partner makes a physical offer without dialogue. The other person accepts the offer, using speech if they choose, and the scene is quickly brought to a resolution. For example, the first person may make a physical offer by putting their hands over their eyes. Their partner accepts the offer by saying, 'don't open your eyes until I tell you, it's a surprise!' Then the second person makes a new physical offer to start a new situation.

2 World adventure

In pairs, pretend you are exploring the globe. Take it in turns to make suggestions about the next step in your adventure. You can make verbal or physical offers.

For example:

A Let's go to the Taj Mahal in India by submarine!

The pair improvises getting to and being at the Taj Mahal. B then mimes hopping on a dog sled.

A Some healthy looking huskies you've got there.

B I only train the best. Let's get to the glacier before sunset!

The action then moves to the new location.

Skill 3: yielding

Yielding is the ability of the performer to 'give way' to another performer's offer without blocking. In a sense it is like saying 'yes' to your fellow performers.



HINT

Improvising can be intimidating, especially when you don't know what is going to happen next. Be open to new possibilities and opportunities. Take risks. Resist the desire to control what is happening. Trust your fellow performers.

EXERCISE

YIELDING

1 Word by word

Work with a partner. You are going to work together to create one character. You will do this by taking turns to say words that, when joined together, create sentences. Stand shoulder to shoulder and put your inside arm around your partner's waist. You are only allowed to speak one word at a time. For example, the two of you could say, 'The - window - is - dirty - and - needs - cleaning'. You must speak in first person. For example, you should say, 'I - like - that - chair' not 'We - like - that - chair'. Move through the room together, describing objects and furnishings.





CHALLENGE

Try this word-by-word exercise with four people. The four people divide into pairs to create two characters. Put these characters in a situation; for example, they could act out a job interview or perhaps a shop assistant serving a customer. The challenge in this exercise is for the four performers to yield to each other to create conversation that flows smoothly between the two characters.



2 Word-at-a-time messaging

This exercise works best when the group watches one pair at a time. Working with a partner, stand shoulder to shoulder as you did in the previous exercise. The character receives and sends messages on a digital device. They must read the messages, describe pictures they are sent and then send replies—all said out loud, one word at a time.

3 Knock-knock, ring-ring, yoo-hoo

This is an exercise to be performed in front of the class. A central character is at home. He or she deals with the interruptions of people who knock at the front door or telephone, and with neighbours who call over the back fence. One volunteer stands to one side of the performing area as one of the characters who will knock at the door. Another volunteer stands to the other side as one of the characters who will make a phone call. A third volunteer becomes one of the neighbours who calls 'yoo-hoo' over the fence.

The challenge is for the central character to yield to the offers made by those who knock, ring or call over the back fence. The volunteers can be as many different characters as they like. It is wise to start slowly, but to increase the frequency of interruptions as the person in the centre becomes more confident in yielding to the offers presented. It is also possible for each character to knock, ring or call 'yoo-hoo' more than once. This helps to build up several plot lines.



COLLABORATE AND THINK CRITICALLY

- 1 Define 'yielding' and explain its purpose in improvisation.
- 2 In what ways did you yield to or cooperate with your partner?
- 3 Did you have difficulty in yielding to your partner? How could you improve in this area? Support your answer with examples.

Skill 4: focus

The skill of focus is the same as the element of drama focus, highlighting a dramatic moment, and is demonstrated when a performer or performers concentrate their attention on a person, object or event. This helps the audience direct their attention to a particular point in the performance space. Often the point of focus is indicated to the audience through the performer's use of their eyes. A strong use of focus on the dramatic action helps to determine what the improvisation is about (see also chapter 3, p. 60).

- The subject of the focus can vary; for example, it may be an object, a person or a group of people.
- The position of the focus can also vary; for example, it may be close to you, slightly distant or far away.

EXERCISE

FOCUS

1 Focus using objects

You will need a collection of assorted props for this exercise. Work with a partner and choose one object. Improvise a situation that uses the object as the point of focus. You can pick up the object and use it in a variety of ways, but it must always remain the point of focus.

2 Changing focus

Sometimes the focus of a situation will change during the improvisation. A performer in improvisation needs to be able to yield to the change of focus.

- Divide into groups of three. Choose an object.
- One member of the group begins to improvise a situation in which the object is the focus.
- The second performer joins the situation. The first performer widens their focus to include the second performer. Both performers focus on the object.
- The third performer enters the scene and stands at a distance from the pair.
- The first two performers shift their focus away from the object to the third performer.
- The scene continues with a focus on the third performer and is then brought to a conclusion.



CHALLENGE

Once the focus has included the third performer, reverse the order of focus by going back to two performers and the object, and finishing with one performer and the object.

COLLABORATE AND THINK CRITICALLY

Explain how the improvisation games you played today have helped you understand the importance of the skill of focus. Comment on any discoveries you made regarding strong offers and effective use of focus. Give examples from your own improvisation work to support your answers.

Skill 5: extending and advancing the action

The skill of 'extending' requires the performer to embellish, elaborate and fill out information. The skill of 'advancing' pushes the story along to the next stage. Extending and advancing can be achieved both physically and verbally. For example, in an improvisation, a murderer sharpens a knife. The murderer repeatedly holds up the knife to the light, testing its razor edge. Here the performer is extending the moment by making the knife seem more dangerous and threatening. The victim then advances the narrative by saying, 'I'll tell you everything. Just untie these ropes and take me to the warehouse'. The murderer cannot refuse this offer, and the story moves on to the next stage.



CHALLENGE

Create some of your own situations where you demonstrate the skills of advancing and extending. Present these to the class.



CHALLENGE

With a partner, follow the 'extending and advancing stories' exercise as described, but this time perform as much of the story as you can by including physical reactions, and by using sound and mime.

EXERCISE

EXTENDING AND ADVANCING

1 Extending and advancing actions

Individually, begin to mime a simple action; for example, opening a can of pet food. When you hear your teacher call the command 'Extend', you must continue with your activity but focus on making more of the particular moment. In the example of opening the can of pet food, you could extend the moment by focusing your attention on the action of attaching the can opener to the can. When you hear 'Advance' called out, you progress the opening of the can to its next stage; for example, turning the handle on the can opener. When you hear 'Extend', the turning of the handle of the can opener becomes more difficult. Repeat both 'Extend' and 'Advance' alternately until the activity is finished.

2 Extending and advancing stories

Divide into pairs and choose to be person A or person B. A begins by telling an imaginary story. B interrupts the story at points and asks for more information. Once A has extended the story by giving more information, A then proceeds with the story. For example, A may say, 'One day I was walking along the beach and found a chain'. B asks questions to extend the information, such as 'What did it look like?', 'What was it made of?' or 'Did it have any special markings?' A responds by yielding to the question. A then advances the story. For example, A may say, 'As I picked up the chain, someone grabbed my wrist'. B then asks another question to extend the narrative, and so on.

COLLABORATE AND THINK CRITICALLY

- 1 Write the skills of improvisation down the left-hand side of a blank page. Leave a gap of about 10 lines between each skill. Explain how you felt you achieved in each skill. Reflect on the exercises in which you participated.
- 2 Which skill areas do you feel best demonstrate your strengths in improvisation?
- 3 Which skill areas do you feel are challenges for you? Offer suggestions for how you could improve in these areas.
- 4 Explain the importance of each skill in creating a successful improvisation. Give examples from your class work to justify your response. Here is a sample logbook entry to help you:

I have just realised how important advancing and extending are as improvisation skills. We have practised these skills over two lessons. Extending allows the performer to make the most of the moment. Joe and I were improvising a struggle to get his character's pet dog into the back of a car. The more we struggled the more the audience laughed. When we felt the joke was over, we advanced by deciding to walk the dog to the vet.

2.3 Character types and status in improvisation

CHARACTER TYPES AND STATUS

In certain types of improvisations you may be given information about a character, while at other times you may be asked to create a character on the spot. To make improvisations interesting it is important to stretch the imagination to create a range of character types rather than relying on predictable characters. This approach gives characters greater complexity, or dimension. For example, a mum who is cooking in the kitchen could be changed to a mum who is packing to fly to China to oversee the building of a single-span bridge. A dad sitting in his chair not saying much and reading the paper could be changed to a dad who illustrates children's storybooks and is also practising to be an opera singer.

In improvisation you also need to be aware of the status relationship between your character and other characters. A character's status, or sense of power, often influences the way they behave. For example, a person who feels they are in charge may be more of a leader and may give instructions to other characters. A character of low status may be unsure in a situation and ask for assistance or advice. Audiences especially enjoy watching situations where the status of a character changes.

EXERCISE

CHARACTER TYPES AND STATUS

1 Character brainstorm

NAME AND AGE	OCCUPATION	HOBBIES	ACHIEVEMENTS	STATUS
Karol Kana, 38 years	Stockbroker	Surf-lifesaving	Mother of five happy children	High
Steve Nguyen, 20 years	Demolition expert	Raising Persian cats	Invented the 'safe' explosive	Low

Divide into groups of four. Create six interesting and unusual character types. Use the table above as an example.

- Choose four character types from the lists you created. Stand in a line, shoulder to shoulder, in front of the class.
- Each person must introduce themselves to the class as their character by telling their name, age, occupation, hobbies and achievements.

2 Status pairs

Divide into pairs and choose one of the following status relationships:

- parent and child
- teacher and student
- employer and employee
- pop star and fan.

With your partner, improvise a situation that explores the expected status relationship between the two characters. Although these are familiar situations, remember to try to devise characters that are interesting types rather than predictable stereotypes. Once you have performed in one of the listed situations, choose another and swap the status role that each person played. This will provide each performer with an opportunity to experience being characters of high and low status.





3 Reversing status

Divide into pairs and choose two characters. In this exercise, the expected status relationship of characters is reversed. For example, a parent character is low status and the child is high status. The child takes on high status responsibilities, such as giving advice and permission to go out.



COLLABORATE AND THINK CRITICALLY

- 1 How did you use your body language to communicate your character's relative status?
- 2 Describe one character you played in the exercises you have just completed. Identify the features of your character that you felt made them unusual and interesting.
- 3 Why is it important to create complex characters in improvisation?

2.4 Improvisation exercises

The following improvisation exercises are designed to test and challenge your improvisation skills. They also require you to demonstrate an understanding of the elements of drama, because you will need to spontaneously establish characters, situation, tension, focus, and place and time. The meaning of your improvisation will be communicated through your use of imagination, body language, gesture and voice. This may seem a little daunting at first, but after practising these exercises you will find your level of skill will improve, as will your improvisations.

EXERCISE

IMPROVISE!

Work carefully through each of the following exercises over an extended period of time. This will allow you to focus on improving your incorporation of improvisation skills and the elements of drama. It is also recommended that you revisit different improvisation exercises in later lessons alongside your use of improvisation as part of the process of creating and making performance work.

1 Improvisation tag

- One person stands in front of the group and mimes an activity. When it is clear what the person is doing, your teacher calls 'Freeze'.
- Another volunteer joins that person and makes an offer to introduce an entirely new situation, using the frozen position of the first person as the starting point.
- After the pair have improvised for a while, your teacher calls 'Freeze' and the pair freeze the action.
- Another volunteer from the group taps one of the frozen pair on the shoulder and that person sits down.
- The frozen position of the remaining person is the stimulus for a new situation. The volunteer observes the frozen position and creates a new situation by making a verbal or physical offer.
- The scene continues until your teacher calls 'Freeze', then a new volunteer is chosen.



HINT

Don't expect that all situations will work well straight away. Be patient—the more you practise, the more skilled you become.



HINT

Be prepared for side coaching from your teacher. The side coaching will help improve the improvisation and requires you to listen to the coaching tips while still performing.



2 Hidden objective

The group is given a situation. Each performer is given a hidden objective on a slip of paper. They must attempt to achieve their objective in the least obvious way by the end of the improvisation. The audience is then asked to identify each character's objective.

3 Whose line is it?

Each class member writes down lines on slips of paper. They can be statements or questions. These lines are only to be revealed during the performance. Two performers select two or three slips of paper each and are given a location. During the improvisation, the performers must include the lines on the slips of paper they selected. They must yield to the content and implications of each line, and extend and advance the action accordingly. It is good to warn your fellow performer that you are about to include a line by introducing it somehow. For instance, you might precede the line with 'So I said to her/him ...' or 'I asked for a newspaper and he replied ...'

IMPROVISATION LOCATIONS, SITUATIONS AND CHARACTERS

The following table gives some sample places, situations and characters that you can use in your improvisation practice. Choose from across the three categories.

PLACES	SITUATIONS	CHARACTERS
Singles' dinner for six	Solving a riddle	Overweight politician
Teachers' self-defence class	Looking for love	Radio announcer who specialises in 'love song dedications'
Hens' night	Selling a new product	Clairvoyant
Ferry captain's birthday party	Revealing a secret	Footballer
Duck pond at the botanical gardens	Chasing a criminal	Scientist
The wrong room	Spying on a foreign agent	Sailor
Customs at London Airport	Building a house	University student
Photographer's darkroom	Creating a fragrance	Bachelor
Change room at a swimming pool	Planning a holiday	Music video host
An ostrich farm	Learning a hobby	Goldminer
On the deck of the <i>Titanic</i>	Auditioning for a television show	Survivor of a shipwreck
Fireworks factory	Speaking to the deceased	Eskimo
Climbing a bridge	Shearing sheep	Eccentric artist
Feathers, sequins and football convention	Painting a mural	Matchmaker
Crocodile farm	Repairing a car	Cowardly rebel
	Diving for treasure	



COLLABORATE AND THINK CRITICALLY

- 1 Which exercises did you enjoy the most? Why?
- 2 Did you have difficulty finding ways to end improvisations confidently? Make suggestions for how you could improve in this area.
- 3 Describe two characters you found unusual and interesting from one of the exercises you observed.
- 4 Explain how you feel you have improved in any of the skill areas of improvisation.
- 5 Is teamwork important in improvisation? Explain your reasoning.

2.5 Playback Theatre

THE POWER OF PERSONAL STORIES

Playback Theatre is an original form of improvisational theatre. It was first created in 1975 by Jonathan Fox, Jo Salas, and the original Playback Theatre Company in the Hudson Valley of New York. In a Playback Theatre performance, audience members tell stories from their lives, and watch them enacted on the spot.

As a Playback Theatre performance progresses, the audience becomes involved in sharing stories. This experience of sharing creates an atmosphere of recognition and understanding because participants relate to each other's experiences. The performance does not seek to solve people's problems by giving answers; rather, it provides an opportunity to reflect. Some of the conventions of a Playback Theatre performance are shown in the following diagram.

Non-realistic acting techniques are used to help heighten particular moments; for example, to portray an audience member's (storyteller's) dreams or to draw out deeper issues in the stories.

An open performance space is used. There are no special sets. The conductor sits with the storyteller to one side of the performance space. The actors sit on chairs in a line against the back wall of the performance space.

Realistic acting techniques are used to help portray characters and real life situations truthfully.

Non-realistic acting techniques are used to help heighten particular moments; for example, to portray an audience member's (storyteller's) dreams or to draw out deeper issues in the stories.

A 'conductor' acts as master of ceremonies. The conductor's role is to guide the proceedings and establish an atmosphere of trust to encourage audience members to share their stories.

All performance is improvised from the stories told by audience members. The performers aim to represent the stories accurately and provide some insight by 'playing back' the stories to the audience.



The stories can include simple events, events from the past and dreams. The story must belong to the storyteller because this makes the Playback Theatre performance more engaging for the storyteller and the audience.

The performers incorporate transformation of objects to help suggest locations and objects, as well as to create symbols.

A percussionist or other musician is included to add atmosphere and sound effects during performances.

COLLABORATE AND THINK CRITICALLY

- 1 List some of your favourite family stories and share them with a partner.
- 2 Imagine you had to pick people in your class to play the characters in your story. Who would you choose? Why?
- 3 Who would you choose to play you? Why?
- 4 Imagine you have been chosen to play the role of another class member in their story. What acting skills would you need to utilise to perform the character truthfully and sensitively?

PLAYBACK THEATRE ACTOR TRAINING

Playback Theatre requires the performer to listen to, interpret and perform the stories of others with little or no preparation. Playback Theatre performers undertake regular and extensive training. They need to be:

- careful and sensitive listeners
- creative and skilled improvisers
- versatile performers
- physically strong and flexible.

PLAYBACK THEATRE EXERCISES

The following exercises are divided into three sections:

- 1 Representing feelings.** These exercises help explore how movement and voice can be used to portray feelings. They also help develop a sense of unity and trust within the group.
- 2 Telling stories.** These exercises help you practise listening to and retelling stories both in words and in performance.
- 3 Non-realistic acting techniques.** In these exercises you will explore how non-realistic acting techniques can be incorporated into Playback Theatre performance work.



HINT

Take time working with the Playback Theatre exercises. Your teacher will work as a conductor and will offer side coaching and advice to help you in your work.

EXERCISE

REPRESENTING FEELINGS

1 Recalling and reflecting feelings

As a group, stand in a circle. On a signal from your teacher, everyone makes a sound and movement that expresses how they feel in the following situations. Each response must be truthful:

- breaking up for holidays at the end of last year
- waking up on your last birthday
- getting your school report at the end of last semester
- a sporting match that your team lost
- how you felt when you came into the room.

2 Mixed feelings

In this exercise, you and a partner will represent conflicting emotions. For example, you may feel happy that your friend won a scholarship to study overseas, but also feel disappointed that they will be leaving. To represent these two emotions, stand one behind the other. The person in front completes a movement, sound, word and/or phrase to represent one of the two emotions. Once the person in front has completed their representation, they crouch down. Then the person behind reveals themselves and uses movement and sound to portray the other emotion.

3 Multiple emotion machines

As a group, choose two of the given situations. Discuss the range of emotions you may experience in these situations. Create a group machine that represents



HINT

In these exercises you need to be spontaneous and trust your instincts about the best decisions to make in your performance work.



HINT

Feelings are abstract. Using sound, words and movement can help give physical representation to how we may be feeling in a situation. Be creative and imaginative in the ways you represent feelings.



these emotions. Each person who joins the machine contributes a repeated movement, sound, word and/or phrase to help sum up the experience. The situations to choose from are:

- being called to the principal's office
- winning the lottery
- being asked out on a date
- seeing your best friend trip and fall just before the finish line in a race.



COLLABORATE AND THINK CRITICALLY

- 1 Describe how one pair used body language, movement and sound to portray the conflicting emotions they represented.
- 2 Imagine you are teaching a drama group how to make an emotion machine that uses rhythm and movement. List five reminders you would give to the group to help make the machine work effectively.



HINT

It is important to remember that, as a Playback Theatre performer, you are looking for the key moments and issues in each story. These should be highlighted in your playback of the story.



HINT

Listening is easier if you actively engage yourself in the story by imagining what it would be like to 'be in the shoes' of the storyteller. This requires an effort of concentration. Do not interrupt your partner when they tell their story. If you want to ask questions for clarification, do this once your partner has finished the story.

EXERCISE

TELLING STORIES

1 Telling and listening

Divide into pairs and take it in turns to tell a personal story to your partner. The story must be true and can be about any situation at any time. Listen to your partner's story. Once they have finished, repeat the story to your partner; try to recall all the details as accurately as possible. Once you have retold your partner's story, check with your partner to see how accurate you were. Some ideas for stories are embarrassing moments, a memorable holiday, the greatest achievement or the biggest disappointment.

2 Telling, listening and performing

Find a new partner. Each person will tell the other a story. Once you have heard your partner's story, you will playback their story by acting out the story in mime. In the playback of the story, aim to be as accurate as possible. Once you have finished, check with your partner to see how accurate you were.

3 Machine playback

Your teacher will guide you through this exercise so that all elements of an actual story are represented in a 'machine'.

One person tells a personal story to the group. Your teacher discusses with the group the different aspects of the story. Each group member contributes a repeated movement, sound, word and/or phrase to the machine to help represent an aspect of the story. For example, if the story is about dropping a bottle of drink in the supermarket, the machine will show the dropping of the bottle, the feeling of embarrassment, the giggles of onlookers, the repeated sound of crashing glass, and so on.

Volunteers continue to add to the machine until the group senses instinctively when the machine is complete, at which point the group must simultaneously





stop the action of the machine. Once the machine has stopped, the participants look to the teller of the story. The conductor checks with the storyteller that the machine is an accurate representation of the story.

4 Story playback

For this exercise you will need to work in groups of six. Each person takes a turn telling a short personal story. They then pick the members of their group whom they would like to play the essential characters. The group members then playback the story as truthfully and accurately as possible.



HINT

Not everyone needs to be part of the machines in exercise 3. Sometimes it is helpful to observe so that you develop a sense of when a machine seems complete.



COLLABORATE AND THINK CRITICALLY

- 1 What did you enjoy most about seeing your story performed?
- 2 What skills did you feel were tested when you listened to and performed others' stories?

EXERCISE

NON-REALISTIC ACTING TECHNIQUES

1 Incorporating non-realistic acting techniques

When playing back a story, sometimes it is important to magnify the important moments. These are usually the climactic moments or moments of greatest tension in the story. You can use some non-realistic acting techniques to help draw out these moments for the storyteller and the audience. These techniques can include slow motion, exaggerated movement, exaggerated sound, mechanical movements and the transformation of objects. Try each of the following:

- work with a partner and represent the fear that someone may be feeling as they search for an intruder
- work with a partner and represent the disappointment someone feels when their date fails to turn up
- work in groups of three and show the anxiety someone may be feeling as they realise they have been caught lying.

2 Non-realistic techniques and playing back stories

Form groups of six. Each person needs to share a personal story that is a dream, daydream, eerie occurrence or bizarre situation. The group chooses one group member's story to playback. The group must use one or more of the following non-realistic acting techniques in the playing back of the story: slow motion, exaggerated movement, exaggerated sound, mechanical movements or transformation of objects.

3 Character thoughts

Form groups of four. Devise a fictional situation in which we hear the thoughts of two characters. The situation may be someone plucking up the courage to ask another person out on a date or it may be a couple having an argument at a restaurant and then refusing to talk to each other for the rest of the meal. The performers playing the characters' thoughts 'shadow' the character by standing just behind them and speaking the character's thoughts aloud at suitable moments.



HINT

As a group, share actual moments from personal stories and re-enact them, incorporating non-realistic acting techniques.



HINT

For exercise 3, use an actual story from your group. Choose volunteers and spend 20 minutes rehearsing a playback of the situation, which you will then perform to the class. Include the use of character thoughts.



HINT

The improvisation skill of yielding is particularly important to the success of exercise 3.



HINT

Although your stories may contain more characters than you have people, it is a good challenge for the performers to find ways of picking the important characters and moments rather than including every small detail.



COLLABORATE AND THINK CRITICALLY

- 1 Explain how non-realistic techniques can draw out aspects of a personal story. Provide an example to illustrate your ideas.
- 2 Evaluate your group's ability to incorporate characters' thoughts into the performance. What skills are needed to include this technique successfully?
- 3 What impact do characters' thoughts have on the audience?

STEPS IN A PLAYBACK THEATRE PERFORMANCE

- The conductor welcomes the audience and explains Playback Theatre, including the procedure of a Playback Theatre performance.
- The conductor starts a warm-up activity to encourage the audience to share their personal experiences. The audience is asked to share, for example, their feelings about their day, and words that sum up a particular event.
- Performers create a machine, using repeated sound and movement that incorporates the suggestions of the audience.
- The conductor invites an audience member (storyteller) to share a story. The storyteller sits with the conductor to one side of the performing area.
- The storyteller tells their story to the audience. The type of story can vary. For example, it may be simple or complex, humorous or moving.
- The Playback Theatre performers listen carefully to the details of the story.
- The conductor asks the storyteller questions to help them express all the important aspects of the story, especially feelings and reactions.
- The conductor invites the storyteller to choose performers to play the characters in the story.
- The performers who are not selected are free to participate as background characters or as a chorus using abstract movement and sound to portray feelings, mood and atmosphere.
- The performers then playback the story.
- At the end of the story the performers look at the storyteller to 'give back' the story.
- The conductor then asks the storyteller their opinion of the playback, including its accuracy and any insights they had.
- The storyteller is thanked for their contribution and a new volunteer is chosen.



COLLABORATE AND THINK CRITICALLY

Invite an audience to a Playback Theatre performance by your class. Your audience may be another Drama class. Your teacher or a student in your class can act as conductor of the performance. As a class, follow the steps for a Playback Theatre performance.

- 1 Recount your experiences of the Playback Theatre performance.
- 2 Describe two moments you found important or valuable in the performance.
- 3 Reflect on the performance and list three or four points that you feel are important to remember for your next Playback Theatre performance.
- 4 What dramatic techniques and/or performance styles do playback performers have available to them when performing in front of an audience? Discuss how some of the performers in your class effectively used these strategies.

PERFORMANCE TASK



2.6 Performance task: improvisation

The task

In this task, you and your teacher will evaluate your ability as an improvisation performer. You will need to draw on the skills of spontaneity, making offers, yielding, focus, and extending and advancing.

Performance preparation

Complete the following steps to prepare for the improvisation performance task. The preparation tasks will provide a list of ideas to use for the performance task. Your teacher will choose ideas from this list for you to use as the basis for your improvisation.

Step 1 Divide into groups of four.

Step 2 Each group is given one of the following elements of drama:

- characters
- situation
- focus
- time and place.

Step 3 Each group is to create and write six options for their element of drama. The options need to be written down so they are not forgotten. Use the following table of examples to help in your preparation.

ELEMENT OF DRAMA	POSSIBLE OPTION
CHARACTERS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Two deep-sea divers• A family of ants• Three backpackers in India
SITUATION	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Travelling on an overseas holiday• Moving into a new house• Donating blood
FOCUS	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• To crack the secret code• To reveal a secret• To ask someone on a date
TIME AND PLACE	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• Early morning on a mountain top• Under a spaceship in 2100• In a well at night

Step 4 Share your ideas with the members of your class or write all the ideas on a whiteboard or blackboard to create one central table.



HINT

You will learn about the elements of drama in more depth in chapter 3.

Improvisation performance

Your teacher will now give your group of four a selection of ideas chosen from the table generated by the class.

During the improvisation you are to:

- include all the ideas that your teacher has selected
- establish a clear situation
- establish and build tension
- use appropriate language and movement.



Performance checklist

You and your teacher will evaluate your work individually, using a list of criteria.

These criteria relate to your achievement in this task. Some criteria will relate to the achievement of the group. The criteria are listed on the evaluation sheet at the end of the chapter and will be used to evaluate your ability to:

- create an interesting character type
- be spontaneous and make useful and appropriate offers
- yield
- advance and extend the action
- manipulate vocal dynamics and movement effectively to suit character and/or object
- work successfully as an ensemble
- build tension in your improvisation
- bring the improvisation to a conclusion.

COLLABORATE AND THINK CRITICALLY

- 1 Write an evaluation of your achievement in your improvisation. Use the performance checklist (above) to help you identify your strengths and the areas in which you could improve.
- 2 Write an evaluation of one other member of your group using the performance checklist. Let the person read and respond to your comments.
- 3 Write an evaluation of a group whose improvisation you felt was strong. Discuss the development of plot, characters and tension, and how the focus was maintained. Did the group arrive at an effective ending? Why was the ending effective?
- 4 Offer three reasons that you feel explain why improvisation is seen as an essential component of a performer's training. In your answer, consider the benefits of utilising improvisation both in rehearsal and in performance.

Performance task: improvisation

Student Teacher

Group names

By completing this task you should be able to:

- explore and utilise the skills of improvisation
- incorporate the elements of drama in improvisations
- create and sustain character types in improvisations
- contribute and incorporate your own ideas to create improvised performance work
- utilise skills of listening, interpretation and improvisation to 'playback' personal stories.

Key learning areas	Level of achievement			
	Beginning	Consolidating	Mastering	Excelling
<p>Creating, making and presenting ideas using skills, knowledge, techniques and processes:</p> <p>Have you prepared for your performance by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • contributing your own ideas? • completing 'collaborate and think critically' questions as required? <p>Have you selected and included the skills of improvisation, vocal dynamics and movement by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • effectively communicating role/character and/or object through the use of movement and mime? • incorporating effective use of vocal dynamics? • being spontaneous and making useful and appropriate offers? • yielding to the offers of other performers? • extending and advancing the action? • bringing the improvisation to an appropriate conclusion? 				
<p>Responding</p> <p>Have you demonstrated knowledge of skills by:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • describing and explaining how the skills of improvisation create a coherent performance? • explaining how improvisers can make effective offers to build tension? 				

Comments

