

Ensemble Building

One of the greatest things about theatre is that it has the power to bring people together. For many, the opportunity for students to interact with people whom they would not necessarily spend time with during the regular school day can be exciting but also nerve-wracking. Additionally, because performing requires a student to be extremely vulnerable, it is important that a level of trust is built within the company. This chapter will provide games and activities dedicated to ensemble-building and creating a safe space for student performers.

NASCENT

Simple exercises that require students to work together:

- **Sound and a Movement**

- » All participants start by standing in a circle.
- » One person makes a sound and does an accompanying movement.
- » Moving counterclockwise around the circle, each participant does the same sound and movement, overlapping slightly, and creating somewhat of a “wave.”
- » Once the sound and movement make it all the way back around the circle, the person who started the wave will do the sound and movement one last time, and then the person standing to her right will start a new wave with a different sound and movement.
- » The exercise continues until every participant has had the opportunity to start the sound and movement.

- **Empty Space**

- » This exercise works best in groups of 5-8.
- » Start by having one person go into the center of the room and freeze in a position (this should be something that they can hold for an extended period of time).
- » Next, have a second participant join the person in the center. The job of the second person is to analyze the position that the first person is in, and find where there is “empty space.” Using his or her body, the second person should fill in that empty space, and freeze in a position.
- » One by one, the other participants will join in the picture, filling the empty space.
- » Once all participants have chosen a position and frozen, the person who started the exercise will step out, observe the picture, and fill in the empty space in a new position
- » In the order that they went in, participants will step out, take in the picture, and fill in a new area of empty space.
- » Continue until each participant has rearranged at least twice.

- **Mirror**

- » Divide participants up into pairs.
- » Within the pairs assign who is A and who is B.
- » Explain that this exercise requires you to work with your partner without speaking.
- » Person A should imagine that she is looking in a mirror. Person B is that mirror.
- » Without speaking, person A should do simple movements that B should mirror. Movement should happen as close to simultaneously as possible.
- » Explain that, should an outside observer come and watch, the idea is that the observer would not know who is leading and who is following.
- » You may need to remind the leaders that their job is not to try and trick their partner, but rather to work together.
- » Keeping eye contact rather than looking at the hands of the other person will help.
- » At some point, allow the student to switch who is leading and who is following.

INTERMEDIATE

- **Clap**

- » All participants start by standing in a circle.
- » One person volunteers to start the clap.
- » Making eye contact with the person standing to her right, the leader will attempt to clap at the same time as the person standing next to her, therefore, passing the clap.
- » The next person will then turn to their right, and pass the clap to the person next to them.
- » The pass should go completely around the circle one time.
- » It should be noted that eye contact should be held at all time, and the individuals should try to work together, not trick or confuse one another.
- » Once the clap travels completely around the circle one time, add the rule that if the person receiving the clap should choose to clap an additional time, the person passing the clap should be ready to receive it. If this happens, the direction of the clap will change and continue in the opposite direction.

- **Machine**

- » Start by having one person go to the center of the room and do a very simple movement and sound. This should be something that they can maintain for an extended period of time.
- » One by one, instruct other students to “add on” to the current sounds and motions, essentially creating a machine.
- » As students join, they should connect with the machine in some way. They should also consider physical and vocal levels and variants.
- » Encourage your students to listen to each other and work together. Make choices that make sense for the bigger picture.
- » Once all students are in place, as an extension, you may slow the machine down, speed it up, or even attempt to move it to another place in the room.

- **Hand to Head**

- » Divide participants up into pairs.
- » Within the pairs, decide who is A and who is B.
- » Explain that this exercise requires you to work with your partner without speaking.
- » Instruct partner A to place her hand approximately 3 inches from partner B’s head.
- » A will then guide B to move in various ways, using only her hand and never any type of vocalization.
- » B should make every attempt to always remain approximately 3 inches from A’s hand.
- » You may need to remind the leaders that their job is not to try and trick their partner, but rather to work together.
- » At some point, allow the student to switch who is leading and who is following.
- » As an extension activity, you may have one person leading two people, or create a “chain” of people following and leading one another.

ADVANCED

- **Bean Bag Toss**

- » All participants start by standing in a circle.
- » One person goes to the center of the circle with a beanbag (or ball, stuffed toy, etc.).
- » Gently, and without speaking, the person in the center will pass the bean bag to one of the people standing in the circle, who will then, in rhythm, toss it back to the person in the circle, and so forth. It is important to establish a rhythm and stick to it.
- » At some point, the person inside the circle will call the name of someone forming the circle, and attempt to time it as such that, once their name is called, that person will move into the circle, taking the place of the caller, and catch the beanbag in rhythm with what has been established.
- » Though it seems counterintuitive, it is helpful if the person calling the name in the middle, calls someone standing behind them, and then moves forward, rather than switching places with the person whose name was called.
- » This will continue until the next name is called.
- » Eventually, you can add additional bean bags, balls, etc. to make the exercise more challenging.

- **Find Your Family**

- » For this exercise, you will need a couple of additional volunteers or instructors to help guide.
- » Divide participants up into even groups of 3-5. These groups are designated as “families.”
- » Without speaking, instruct them to examine the hands of each person in their family. They may (and

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- probably should) touch the hands of each person in the family, and make note of any jewelry that family members are wearing.
- » After 30 seconds to one minute, either blindfold or instruct each participant to close their eyes (and be honest by not opening them).
 - » Instructors and volunteers should then spread out participants around the room and away from their families.
 - » Once everyone is spread out, instruct the participants to, without talking and only by physically examining hands, find their families. Once they find the members of their family, they should stand still with their family.
 - » If someone is not in your family, do not stay with them. If someone is in your family, keep them.
 - » Instructors and volunteers should help to keep everyone within the confines of the room and safe.

MUSICAL THEATRE

Taking advanced exercises even further:

- **Hot Spot**

- » All participants start by standing in a circle.
- » As a group, come up with what is called the “Golden Nubby.” This is a simple theme to fall back on. For example: Love, Friendship, Sunshine. It should be something that a lot of songs reference.
- » Once the Golden Nubby is established, someone should jump into the middle of the circle and start singing a song inspired by the golden nubby. It does not have to make sense, and it does not have to be good. The participant must keep singing until someone else jumps in and starts singing a new song, inspired by the song that was just being performed.
- » Participants should be encouraged to jump in as soon as a song pops into their head, and not edit themselves.
- » Inspiration can come from the lyrics, artist, time period, subject matter, or anything else that inspires them.
- » It is important to not let someone stay in the middle for too long. This only makes them feel self-conscious. This exercise is about working together and helping each other out.
- » If, at any point, no one can think of a song related to what is being sung, revert back to the golden nubby and start a new song inspired by that.
- » If two people jump in at the same time and sing two different songs, allow it to continue until someone else is inspired by one of the two songs and jumps in. At this point, both singers exit the center of the circle.
- » The game ends once everyone has gone into the circle at least once, and either two people jump in at the same time and start singing the same song OR it comes full circle and someone is inspired to start singing the song which started the game off.

As an extension of any of the exercises listed in Nascent, Intermediate, or Advanced, you may encourage students to participate in the activities while also singing numbers from the musical which you are producing.

ADDITIONAL RESOURCES

BOOKS

Improvisation for the Theater by Viola Spolin, 1963.

This is the third edition of the bible for improvisational theatre.

Theatre Games for the Classroom by Viola Spolin, 1986. This book offers the most comprehensive theater instruction for all types of students, from small children to young adults.