CHAPTER FIVE
INFORMAL CLASSROOM DRAMA

In this chapter we suggest dramatic activities that are largely improvisational. We reserve for a later chapter the rendering of texts. "Informal classroom drama" covers the "creative dramatics" of elementary school, the "improvising" of secondary, and the "role-playing" of both. The activities these terms usually refer to hold good in most cases for a wide range of school years. The actors invent all or most of the dialogue, action, and characterization, drawing material sometimes from the surrounding culture but, if so, always remaking it in their own way.

Improvising is making up the particulars as one goes along. This creative process is at the heart of all oral language development, for any speaker plays the options of the language and makes up new sentences she has never heard before. But drama, like conversation, is not all verbal. Actors practice also the repertory of "body English" that accompanies speech or simply speaks for itself.

Drama is not necessarily theater. Theater concerns performance for an audience, whose point of view is accommodated and for whose benefit effects are calculated. Theater is a secondary effect of drama, an outgrowth appropriate in school only for experienced players who ask for an audience.

THE VALUE OF INFORMAL CLASSROOM DRAMA

None of the activities presented in this chapter are merely "games for kiddies" or "enrichment." Rather, they are a vital part of the language arts curriculum. Teachers should not feel that time spent on them takes away from reading and writing or basic literacy. Drama will definitely further such goals.

The general purposes of drama at any age are to:

- promote expression of all kinds, movement and speech harmonizing and reinforcing each other.
- limber body, mind, and tongue.
- develop concentration and focus of energy.
- single out the verbal mode from the others and thus to activate speech in particular.
- forge drama into both a learning instrument for other ends as well as an appropriate end in itself.

- make the school experience with language fun and meaningful in youngsters' terms.
- habituate students to working autonomously in small groups.
- further peer socialization of a learning sort not usually possible outside of school.
- foster intuitive understanding of style as voice, role, and stance, and of rhetoric as achieving effects on others.
- develop in the more familiar mode of dramatic play those characteristics necessary for the less familiar process of discussing, such as attending, responding, interacting, and taking turns.
- exercise and channel emotions.
- stimulate second-language acquisition through lively oral practice.

■ NONVERBAL UNDERPINNING

Though movement-to-sound, pantomime, and charades do not seem at first glance to relate directly to the development of speech, they in fact lay an important base for it. For young people, speech is only one physical activity among others (as indeed it really is for all of us), and not normally a preferred one. As a specialized mode of communication and expression, it only gradually singles itself out from movement and gesture until, in print, it becomes totally separate. For youngsters, speech accompanies other action and justifies itself only when it can do what other actions cannot.

Movement-to-sound, charades, and pantomime permit the child both to develop her powers of nonverbal modes of expression and to run up against their limitations. In pantomimes and charades, one sometimes fairly bursts to speak those things difficult to convey by movement and gesture alone. Body English helps students learn what words can do by trying to do without them. It is thus part of multimedia learning.

Conversely, body English can say some things with greater brevity and power than words can. Also, sensory awareness and intuition are often heightened when talking ceases. Nonverbal expression remains throughout the student's school experience important as a supplement to speech, a base for speech, and an alternative to speech. What should be explored are the advantages and limitations of both. All students need ample opportunity to relate words and deeds and, when possible, to translate from one to the other. In addition, physical action gives pupils a respite from language while at the same time enhancing it. Most students—like the rest of us—are hard put just to sit and work with books and paper all day.

Many of the problems that begin in the upper elementary and junior high years—destructive rebellion, alienation from school, dropping out, and crime—all can be alleviated if youngsters see school as a place where feeling and energy can be shaped and handled, instead of a place where these forces must be stifled. Many teachers are afraid that drama work will open a vent and create disorder, but nearly all people who try it find that it tends actually to lower tensions and help students behave better. Youngsters who express most feeling and meaning through the body are allowed to remain on native ground while being drawn to explore the new territory of language.

One hears much talk in education about multisensory learning and multiple intelligences—far more talk than one sees classroom implementation. The activities recommended here translate this talk into learning reality.

■ PERSONAL AND SOCIAL GROWTH

Drama exercises and focuses emotions as well as thoughts. Real feeling can be expressed in a situation made safe by the pretense "I am being someone else." Students choose stories to enact and situations to improvise that attract them for inner reasons. Acting out some such germ of action, interacting with others at the same time, induces insight about oneself and others. It doesn't merely elicit feeling but also shapes it in a transpersonal learning activity. It has the therapeutic value of art in general.

Dramatic activities demand concentration, involvement, and response. They show how to relate to other people. Role-playing permits trying out voices and languages not usually one's own, to understand from the inside what it's like to be someone else. Through the active use of the imagination a player identifies at times with both other players and with the characters in the fiction they are creating. Rotating roles and revising versions, she views interpersonal relations and problems from multiple viewpoints that develop thoughtfulness and good judgment in real life. Through dramatic experience she becomes not only more empathic about others but more confident about herself.

While mirroring the real world, drama provides a wedge into it, letting the participants prelive the feel and texture of experience before they are thrust into the risk of an actual event. In so doing, they can begin to develop some of the skills needed to handle such experiences. Even adults rehearse an important interview or upcoming speech to prepare emotionally and intellectually for a challenge. Art allows us to preplay as well as replay experience. Personal and social growth depend a great deal on opportunities to work over experience under safe conditions.

■ WRITING

Increasingly in the upper elementary and secondary school years improvisation is taken to paper. Students can begin by recording an improvised dialogue and then transcribing it later, writing it up as a play script. Pantomime can also be extended by writing (see page 214). Anything that can be improvised can be scripted, as pursued in *ACTUAL AND INVENTED DIALOGUE*.

But dramatic work improves writing in general as it does oral fluency and expression. Like conversationalists, improvisers learn to compose without going through the slow process of putting things on paper and waiting for delayed reactions. A student improvising gets fast, relevant feedback from partners and is constantly adjusting her language expression on the basis of its effects. Consider drama as an especially powerful form of the oral practice that underlies writing.

Improvising skits may seem a far cry from persuasive writing and argumentation, but in fact the connection is very close.[1] Players are constantly trying to per-

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[1] See Betty Jane Wagner, The Effects of Role Playing on Written Persuasion: An Age and Channel Comparison of Fourth and Eighth Graders. *Dissertation Abstracts International 43* (1987), 08–A. (UMI NO. D82-29981). Students who role played wrote significantly more persuasive letters than those who discussed rules for good persuasion and studied model letters.

suade and dissuade each other. Such tension between the different characters' motives indeed makes up much of drama, which is nothing if not rhetoric in action. Rhetoric is the art of getting effects on others. Improvisers must think up things to say that will influence each others' behavior. This means giving reasons of one sort or another. At the same time, they are refuting or discounting them as much as possible and forcing each other to counter the objections to them or find new ones. These reasons run the same gamut as in persuasive essays—from various kinds of material and authoritative evidence to pure logic. Dialoguists have to know their audience and think of reasons that will persuade or dissuade their particular interlocutor. And they must choose illustrations and wording that this person can understand and appreciate.

■ COMPREHENSION AND THINKING

Whenever students take turns as actors and audience, getting and giving feedback in cross-commentary, they have a challenging opportunity to correct their own egocentricity. As they share responses, they compare interpretations. This can be a valuable way to see how we assemble cues into inferences and how it is that, witnessing the same action, we can interpret differently. This uncovers the sort of hidden assumptions and subjective reactions that operate in our interpretation of real life and of reading matter. Physical action can be very ambiguous: some spectators will say that a pantomime is about a hunter stalking game and others will say it is about a detective tracking a criminal. Language removes much ambiguity, but, as another sort of behavior, dialogue too can be ambiguous. A guessing game is an inference task.

No other activity—except game playing, perhaps—puts such constant pressure on the participants to think on their feet, make spontaneous decisions, exercise independence, and respond to the unexpected in a flexible, creative way as dramatic invention does. Drama integrates physical, social, and intellectual forces and undergirds the language arts curriculum because drama is life made conscious.

The following activities represent different ways in which students of all ages can act out without using a script. They include not only dramatic scenes but also certain warm-up movements, acting games, play with objects, role-playing, and other inventive expression through gestures, words, and actions. These take place concurrently in the curriculum but might be begun by students in a staggered fashion, following roughly the order of their presentation in this chapter. Any one may be returned to at any point as a warm-up for a more demanding activity or as another way of coming at an experience. For example, pantomime is never outgrown; it continues to play an important part in developing one's communication skills even into adulthood.

Some of the processes presented earlier below can give students of any age the experience they need to undertake more mature improvisations. Unison actions, for example, will help students feel comfortable with one another and get used to conscious body expression. Newcomers of any age will probably need to develop their acting powers within the safety of whole-class or small, unwitnessed groups. The important thing is that dramatic inventing not be considered appropriate only for young children. The older students become, the harder it is to introduce them to dramatic work if they have never had it before, but it's important to do so for all the reasons given here and throughout this chapter.

PLAY WITH OBJECTS

The first dramatic activity of the young child is solitary play, spontaneous acting out not so much to deliberately imitate what she sees about her as to become it. This early drama wells up from a passion to relate to the environment, to know it and oneself through interacting with it. At first, toys are the stuff of drama. For the small child, they automatically imply some words and deeds; they provide a point of departure. Grasping a stuffed animal, puppet, wand, sword, stethoscope; donning a feather, cap, mustache, kerchief, or cape; standing before an imagined moon rocket or gate of gold—all these suggest to a child what to do, by evoking a host of associations in which the item is embedded in her mind. (Of course, these associations vary among cultures; a Southern African American or a Harlem Puerto Rican may find meaning in different objects than a middle-class white would.)

The stimulus of objects doesn't end with the early years. Even adults are eased into drama by concrete points of departure or stimulants that both suggest and limit the dramatic idea. Few persons, no matter how experienced, plunge right in when asked to "make up a drama." Often just one prop or object will start them off. For example, if a player places a crown on her head, her action is both stimulated and to an extent determined. Certain acts such as hammering an anvil no longer seem appropriate, but at the same time other behavior is suggested. By limiting action and feeling to that appropriate for the role, a child becomes a player, assuming behaviors that are not customary. Her imagination determines the extent to which the new role can move her into new awareness, into hitherto unrealized experience.

Classrooms need to contain many objects that can stimulate drama, but these can be cast-off gear like phones or a cash register or career uniforms. An inexpensive colored spotlight or two, clamped on the back of a chair or onto a shelf, help establish mood. A light dimmer can quickly create a similar magic. The classroom needs window shades to control light for mood as well as for projections. As performers gain experience, they will increasingly be able to imagine the properties they handle instead of actually having to have them on hand.

Costumes are never necessary, but inexperienced students seem to invent more freely and feel more comfortable when a token of dress or property is provided. Too complete costuming can impede a novice's movement, and sheer realism can stultify creativity. Thus a "costume" may be something as simple as a paper bag mask or a picture hung around the neck or pinned on the front of the actor's shirt. These symbolic items allow small children to "be" a monster, a witch, or a fire fighter.

They seem to have to be themselves by being something else. They like to invest themselves with the qualities and powers of some object, animal, or fantasy figure. They work out realities through fantasies and thus prefer the symbolic and ritualistic to the actual and original. Young actors often require masking as a condition for being creative. But they also imitate realistically various kinds of adults, partly to understand adults and partly to try on their powers. No matter what our age, we never outgrow this need to project feeling into roles we enjoy or need to assume.

All you need do at first is to provide a few materials and a time and climate for acting with props. For young children the play process usually takes care of itself if there are plenty of fantasy objects and playmates. Experience suggests

that a natural sequence is from playing alone to playing in pairs to playing in larger groups. An advantage of acting out at school rather than at home is that individual play soon becomes group play as children become interested in and influenced by what others are doing. A child may begin by monologuing her fantasy as she plays, or by making up a conversation between two puppets, and end by playing doctor to several patients. Certain props, such as play money or a pair of telephones, naturally call for social play and promote interaction; they also promote the specific social play of talking.

Props or bits of costume may be put in groups of three to five in separate paper bags. Then small groups may be given the challenge of making up a skit using all the props in the bag. Any object may serve any of a number of functions: for example, a cane may be a shepherd's crook, a railing of an ocean liner, a bar to a locked door, a trapeze, an umbrella, Neptune's trident, and so on; the only stipulation is that each of the objects in the bag must be used in the skit. Then bags of props can be exchanged, or their contents shuffled, new skits performed, and then these compared with the first ones. The skits can then be taken to paper and turned into scripts or stories.

PUPPET PLAY

Because improvising actions and dialogue for a puppet is a less threatening way to act out something, many youngsters will work with puppets before they are willing to engage in other dramatic activities. Their own person is masked in the puppet they are playing, but the same challenge of improvising and inventing that is present in any acting-out process is there.

Many books provide directions for making a puppet stage and all kinds of puppets—stick, Styrofoam, papier-mâché, mitten, sock, glove, finger, paper bag, box, paper plate, or yarn puppets, and so on. Identification with the puppets is especially strong when students have made the puppets themselves.

If possible, a puppet theater should be available where inexperienced puppeteers may improvise without an audience if they prefer and where the more experienced may stage a performance, inviting a small group or the whole class to watch. This type of performance is an appropriate first-one-with-an-audience because the puppets, not the puppeteers, are the focus. Youngsters will use their voices more boldly because they think of them as issuing from the puppets.

MOVEMENT-TO-SOUND

Movement-to-sound, including rhythm and music, has some advantages over play with toys; it leaves more to the imagination, and it prompts the youngster to use her body more. We recommend movement-to-sound sessions two or three times a week for younger children.

Underlying all language is sensitivity to the experiences of the senses and to mood and feeling. Music has power to evoke these and provides a strong impetus first to bodily expression and then to language development. Live or recorded instrumental music or songs can stimulate expressive movement and pantomime not only of action but also of the more subtle elements of feeling and mood.

Simple rhythms provided by clapping the hands or beating a drum, tambourine, sticks, cans, or boxes, or playing other instruments, such as gongs, bells, pipes, recorders, or whistles, can make a good beginning. Recorded marches or dances can follow. A piano, autoharp, or guitar can stimulate movement well.

The important thing is to diversify the sound for perceptual discrimination, emotional range, and bodily articulation. Play with all the possibilities, no matter what instrument you use: shift the stress in rhythms, speed up and slow down tempo, raise and lower or shorten and lengthen the notes, widen and narrow the intervals between notes, make the sound skip or trip or drag or slide, alternate quiet and turbulence. Isolate one at a time the various dynamics of music—staccato, glissando, crescendo, accelerando, ritardando—then join them later into little sequences for the group to react to with bodily movement.

In responding to these diverse sounds students will have the opportunity to build a wide repertory of body movements. Upon this repertory depends the ability to act with the body—to pretend to be a frog or an old man climbing a snowy mountain. Learning to discriminate various auditory dynamics will sensitize youngsters to pattern and structure in other media, including literature. And running the sound spectrum is running the emotional gamut.

Unlike play with objects, which best begins with solitary play and gradually moves to interaction among a larger group, movement-to-sound best begins, even for very young children, as a whole-class simultaneous activity. This can progress from movement in concert to individual movement and thence to interaction among individuals. We suggest this because personal invention comes slowly, and because many children are shy of bodily exposure, which is minimized when everyone is doing the same sort of thing together. Confidence comes from identifying with a large group such as a class. But as is true in many other areas, the individual develops by shedding her dependence on the group. Once she is able to express herself somewhat in her own way, she can learn to interact with other individuals in a more truly social way than when she was merely a herd member.

The following procedural suggestions reflect the progression from concert to individualized movement. The three stages are for convenience.

■ HERD MOVEMENT

Since you or another leader make the sounds while the students react, a controlled activity of the whole class becomes possible. This gives each person a chance to act out feeling in a creative way without the embarrassment of having an audience. Begin by beating a strong, simple rhythm that students will take as a cue to either skip, run, tiptoe, slide-step, leap, jump, or hop, directing them only to "move the way the sound tells you to." Groups of primary children almost always fall into a circular movement, often following one or two leaders. Both this ritual and your control of the sound production impose order on this mass energy.

Try out many of the variations mentioned above, gradually complicating the sound sequences by producing different dynamics in succession, but hold each pattern long enough for students to work into it. If attention seems scattered slow the pace or lower the volume. Have everyone freeze when the music stops and then slowly look around to see what others were doing.

■ INDIVIDUAL INVENTION

Begin to alternate these locomotions with movements in place by sometimes directing participants to move each in a small area of her own, and occasionally even telling them not to move their feet. But first make the sound while they are resting and ask for ideas about how to move to it. Experiment with moving just one part of the body at a time (finger, heels, toes, head, elbows, shoulders, and so on) or with sitting and moving only from that position. Try motions that are twirling, angular, smooth, jerking, gliding, striking, shaking, bouncing, pushing, pulling, stretching, thumping, or swinging. Let the class try out these various motions one at a time in concert. The questions would be: What is happening? Who are you? Where are you? This helps students verbalize or demonstrate the movement idea in dramatic terms.

Then dispense with the practice of asking for ideas and just tell the class to move in place as the sound tells them to. Those who still have to imitate will do so, and those who are ready will invent. Occasionally repeat a sound sequence and tell them to do a different movement to it than they did the first time. Continue the sound variations. Encourage students to imagine a setting, an action there, and a personage. Have them be that person or thing doing that action in that place. Introduce more extended pieces of music, especially music suggestive of mood and action. Let them know that they may speak as they move, and have them move about, each in her own area.

■ SMALL-GROUP INTERACTION

Place the class in pairs, trios, and quartets (gradually increasing the number in each group) and direct them to share space with their partners. The point is not to make them act or dance together but simply to clump them for spontaneous interaction, to let them influence each other in a group-defined area where they may move in place or move about. Recompose the groups on each occasion. Continue sound variations.

These three stages—herd movement, individual invention, and small-group interaction—continue to be a good warm-up for any group, no matter how experienced. They are cumulative; to enter a new stage is not to abandon previous ones but to add to them.

WARMING-UP AND CONCENTRATION ACTIVITIES

It is well to begin any drama session with an activity or two involving the entire group to help them feel comfortable, relaxed, and in the mood to improvise and act expressively. Talking about an activity, trying it, then discussing feelings, actions, and qualities of performance help performers assimilate and evaluate the experience.

■ RELAXATION EXERCISES

To loosen up the body, try singing games such as "Hokey Pokey" that call for kinesthetic experience, or exercises like these:

- Roll the head clockwise and counterclockwise.
- Hunch up one shoulder and then the other in quick succession.
- Pretend to yawn several times until you actually do yawn.
- Stretch tall, then to each side; bend over, unlock the knees and bounce gently. Repeat several times.
- Start at one end of the room and move forward in a relaxed stupor, allowing your body to be tipped off balance in a forward direction, but don't fall; just keep moving forward, unbalanced and loose. When you get to the end of the space, reverse the balance and walk backward; then fall and lie flat on the floor and close your eyes.
- Get as low as possible and scrunch up into a tiny space, tightening each muscle; then, slowly, open up, taking as much space as you can.
- On the floor take each part of the body in turn, beginning with the toes, and tense and release all the muscles; go all the way up to your forehead; then lie still for a few moments, eyes closed. Open your eyes; take a deep breath.

■ CONCENTRATION ACTIVITIES

To help young children concentrate and listen discriminately, games such as "Simon Says" serve well as a starter. Games such as those below demand more concentration.

TOSS IMAGINARY OBJECTS

- Arrange yourselves in a circle or in two lines facing each other. Begin by throwing out an imaginary ball, telling a particular person to catch it, while all eyes watch it.
- After everyone is involved, change the size or weight of the ball, saying, for example, "Watch the ball; it is getting tinier and heavier. It is like a tiny marble made of lead. It is very, very heavy."
- Later you can again change the ball to a big ball, and then into a big beach ball, a hot potato, a porcupine, a pillow, a feather, and so on.

MIRRORS

- Work in pairs, one to be the actor, and the other the mirror.
- Face your partner. If you're the actor, start moving any way you choose, moving slowly and with concentration. You may either pretend to do something such as combing your hair, or you may move abstractly in straight or curved lines with different parts of your body.
- If you're the mirror person, try to pick up your partner's actions so exactly that no one is able to tell who's the actor and who's the mirror.
- Then change so the actors are mirrors and the mirrors actors.
- For a more challenging activity, have a team of two initiate an action such as winding a ball of yarn, and have another team mirror the action.
- At another time, have a person convey an emotion and the other person mirror the feeling as well as the action.

PANTOMIME

To pantomime is to render feeling, idea, and story wordlessly in gesture and action. It's but a step from moving to music and is often effectively combined with it. After movement to sound has become a regular activity and has reached the stage of individual invention, it may easily be combined with pantomime. Instead of toys, props, or sounds, the stimulant now is an idea of an action.

A whole class working simultaneously eliminates self-consciousness and helps participants feel comfortable. Whole-class activities give students a background of experiences they can draw on later in smaller groups. The progression, as with movement to sound, is twofold—toward individuals doing different things at the same time and toward individuals forming small groups that do different things at the same time.

■ UNISON

The best way to initiate your students into pantomime will probably be to give the whole class one action at a time to do together.

WALK IN A CIRCLE AS A WHOLE CLASS

As students walk, you or a student leader feed in suggestions, starting with simple sensory experience and moving at a later time to names of times or places that evoke a more imaginative response for which students supply more of the sensory details for themselves. Keep the pace slow to allow time for belief. Here are some suggestions you or the class can provide:

- As you walk, you're slowly getting taller and taller. You're seven feet tall, now twelve feet. How do you feel? Now you shrink back to your own size.
- You're walking through tall grass. Is it smooth, slippery, prickly? What color is it? Is it dry and brittle or fresh and supple? Now you are walking over hot sand, on eggshells, in a swamp, through water, through molasses, in deep snow, over fallen leaves, on slippery ice, along the edge of a cliff, through cobwebs, in a dense fog, in quicksand.
- You're very hot, very cold, floating on air, frozen into an icicle, now melting bit by bit, caught in the heavy gravity of Jupiter.
- You're lost in a dark tunnel; you're walking at night under bright stars; you're fighting with an octopus; you're entering a strange school for the first time; you're carrying a heavy fish tank full of water to the brim; you're skating fast; you're leading a lumbering camel across the desert.

PRETEND TO BE

Ask pantomimists to pretend to be all sorts of things, at first selecting simple acts: a giant striding, a hobbled prisoner, someone hauling on a rope or pulling a sled, someone opening a door or window or umbrella or difficult bottle, someone drinking something pleasant or unpleasant, a salesperson demonstrating a product. Children particularly delight in assuming the role of an animal such as a frog, fish, elephant, butterfly, or duck and acting out its characteristic behavior. This activity can begin with unison actions, then individuals can choose an animal,

and, finally, they can pantomime different animals and guess each other's. Anything that can be experienced with the senses can be pantomimed.[2]

PRETEND TO DO

When ordinary acts such as washing hands, swimming, eating a meal, peeling an orange, playing a game such as baseball, or riding a bicycle are pantomimed, students are pressed to rely on kinesthetic and sensory memory, making explicit previously unnoticed details of an action and performing steps in chronological sequence. The feel of the experience is re-created in a process that is very demanding of concentration and memory. Pantomiming an action in slow motion can help learners re-create experience through remembered sensing of shape, size, color, texture, weight, temperature, odor, and so on. Good writing often depends on a similar process.

Select actions that will continue to enlarge the repertory of movements—bending, twisting, contracting, stretching—with all parts of the body, and in all directions. Tell students, for example, to imagine that they're standing close to a building, facing it, and straining to look up at someone in a very high window; then the person at the window throws something out that curves slowly over their heads and falls behind them; they follow it with their eyes, bending back until, as it nears the ground behind them, they finally have to twist around. Or station them all along the walls and tell them to try to push the wall over in as many different ways as they can think of without striking it.

Once students are familiar with the process, ask them for suggestions. Continue to select the ideas, however, both for muscular and dramatic variety. Then give the group an action made up of a series of acts, such as entering a room through a window, taking something from a chest, hiding it on one's person, and leaving. Then add different motives for doing the action, such as to play a joke on a friend or to commit a burglary.

■ SMALL-GROUP

Small-group work can begin after students are well-experienced with unison pantomimes and after they have acquired some social maturity. Some directions might tell them how to do such things as the following, any of which may be done as a whole class prior to small-group work.

CREATE A CONTRAPTION

- Have one person (possibly the teacher for inexperienced groups) step into an open space and start a movement, such as rotating a gear, making her body into a part of a machine. She keeps this movement going.
- Have another person join her, adding a different motion but relating herself to the moving part in some way. For example, she might alternately squat and stand to represent a piston.

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[2] A very helpful book for combining pantomime and yoga exercises, illustrated with photos of preschool to junior high children, is Rachel Carr, *Be a Frog, a Bird, or a Tree* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1973).

- While the first participants keep up their motion in pantomime, the rest of you, one by one, attach yourselves to the "contraption," each adding a different motion.
- When everyone is participating, have your leader call for a slowing down or speeding up of the contraption's operation, and, finally, push the "off" button to stop it.
- The next time, either create the contraption to appropriate music, or each of you can add an appropriate sound or words as your part goes into action.

GET OUT OF TRAP

- As a group, pretend to lie down to sleep. When you awake, you find yourself in some kind of enclosure—a box, a dome-shaped plastic bell, a large ball, a metal machine, or some such thing.
- Then slowly examine its limits in pantomime. Feel the texture, temperature, dimensions, and strength of this container.
- Finally, after thoroughly exploring it, find a way out and escape.

CREATE AN ENVIRONMENT

- Meet as a group in a large space.
- One at a time, in slow-motion pantomime, put something in the space. For example, you may pretend to push in a large harp and bench and then sit down and play it so everyone will know what you've brought in.
- If you're next, decide in your own mind what this place is and introduce another object that belongs in such a place. For example, you might bring in a music stand or another instrument and strum the harp on the way out.
- Each of you then goes into the space and puts a new thing in it and uses one other thing that someone else put there. You must be careful to walk around or take account of everything that has been put in the space.
- Be sure that the dimensions and shape of whatever you put in the space are clearly revealed. Do the pantomime slowly and in detail.
- Discuss afterward what everyone thought each of the others was pantomiming.
- You may decide to do an improvisation in the environment you have created, using all the things you have put there.

PANTOMIME A STORY

Experienced students meet in small groups, choose a story, cast themselves in the various roles, and improvise a pantomime. Often the group contains more people than parts so that members take turns playing and watching, in workshop fashion.

Make sure players keep in mind that pantomime is played without words and without props; their bodies alone tell the story. Objects are suggested by movement in feigned relation to them or can be played by other people (rock, tree, revolving door, and so on). Good pantomime demands concentration, belief, and memory. Players must remember, for example, which things are in which places.

When the players have been through a pantomime once, they can discuss any changes they might make, rotate roles, do the story again, and discuss both versions. Doing different versions of the same basic action is a form of composition

and also draws some attention to technique (the commentary coming from the participants, not from the teacher or any other audience). Recasting roles establishes early the principle of flexibility and point of view in role-playing and breaks any typecasting based on traits of personality and physical build. Don't ask one group to perform for others. Let players request an audience if they want one.

WHAT AM I DOING?

Any pantomime can be a focus for a guessing game. After individuals have acquired some confidence they can take turns pantomiming characterizations, actions, and places and have a partner or a small group guess who they were, what they were doing, and where they were. The feedback that comes from the guessers shows a player any discrepancies between what actually got across and what she had in mind. The pantomimist can learn from this alone, but concrete suggestions for making her intention explicit may help too.

For other guessing games, a player writes down first what she's going to do as a kind of script, onlookers write down after the pantomime what they saw, and all compare accounts. Or players can pantomime each other's scripts.

Groups can pantomime problem situations where characters are involved with each other. Onlookers tell the players afterwards the story as they saw it. This is a good occasion to discuss differences in interpretations among onlookers as well as differences between these interpretations and what players intended. Ideally, such comparisons would refer to specific gestures and other physical renditions.

CHARADES

Guessing games can take the form of charades—the pantomiming of verbal phrases, titles, and quotations. In this case, what the audience tries to guess are not the actions themselves but certain words that the actions merely evoke. This feature, of course, makes the game more sophisticated and more abstract, since actions must be linked with particular words for them, not with just any words for them (*steed*, not *horse*). And often, it's only via purely verbal associations such as puns, that the right word is arrived at (*I* by pointing to one's eye). Also, instead of holding off the answer until the end of a whole presentation, the actor makes the audience guess at each act, each word. This makes for intense audience participation and fast feedback.

■ SLIDE SHOW OR MOVIE

Pantomime lends itself to presentation in a series of slides or a silent movie. In order to depict a story in pictures without recorded sound, actors need to rely on the skills in gesturing and body English they have learned in pantomime. Several different versions of the same scene might be tried out as a guessing game before filming the best one.

■ PANTOMIME AND DANCE DRAMA

Combining movement to music with pantomime opens interesting possibilities. It stimulates all players to respond to the same stimulus at the same time, but they

may respond in very different ways. Either individual pantomimes can take place simultaneously or small-group interaction can take place as the music is played. All three ways of responding—unison, individual, and small-group—may be combined in planning a group pantomime after listening to a piece of music once or twice. Or, if known story-music such as "Peter and the Wolf" is used, roles can be simply assigned. Or grouped individuals can invent movements in relation to, say, three partners, the directions being to move as one feels but to stay aware of the others, to share the group space, and to let oneself be influenced by what the others are doing.

For students having considerable experience with movement, pantomime to music can lead to dance drama in which the feelings stirred by music act as a more open, more subjective stimulant than words, while at the same time the ongoing rhythm and melody create dynamics of their own that translate readily to movement. The actions of pantomime tend to mimic recognizable outward gestures, whereas dance drama tends to express less explicit inner moods given form by the music. So movement to music offers more opportunity for personal, free improvisation. Story music makes a good bridge at first between these two kinds of body English—pantomime and dance drama, which become fused as players respond to both musical stimuli and actions suggested by them.

ENACTMENT AND IMPROVISATION

From here on, our suggested activities will combine speech with other action.

■ DRAMATIZING STORIES

Play with objects, movement to sound, and pantomime may be combined with speech to act out a borrowed or original story. In the elementary school tradition called "creative dramatics" this can begin in the primary grades, but its value is ageless. First the players choose a story they already know, recall it together, and decide what the main events are, which characters they want to cast for, and when and where the story takes place. They might decide also whether to use props, have people play inanimate things, or add musical or singing accompaniment. Typically a sub-group of the class would do this, but the size of the cast needed might require the whole class.

The players act out the plot by improvising the particulars of dialogue and action according to their memory of the main story line. They should feel free to enlarge or eliminate any character or add a character. They can change events in the plot including the ending. The original story serves only to inspire their acting and spur their invention.

Like other improvisations, the main value accrues to the players themselves, but they may want an audience at some point, perhaps after acting the story out several times to develop a version they like. Inexperienced actors often become more involved with the audience than with fellow players, which impairs their concentration. Present improvisation as something primarily to do, not to see done.

The purpose of this freewheeling handling of a story is to provide an opportunity for a group to take possession of it and re-create it in a way that interests them, just as they might do in discussing it or extending it in writing (page 164). This reinforces literature for better comprehension and appreciation. Enacting a

story after reading or hearing it ties the printed word to the physical world of behavior and translates the subject into another medium. During preparatory discussion, children might need to refer to the printed story when making decisions about how to act it out. This task talk focuses on an analysis of the text to determine plot, characterization, and meaning. Acting out stories leads easily into Story Theater, described on page 188.

■ CROWD-SCENE IMPROVISATIONS

Large-group improvisation attunes players to the presence and actions of many people at once and lets individuals experience the collective energy of large numbers. It also gives the teacher an opportunity to assume a role through which to stimulate and heighten the drama.

Large-group improvisations are best done in a group of fifteen to thirty, which is large enough for each person to feel comfortable in the "crowd" yet not so large that the teacher cannot be aware of individual performance. As with small-group improvisations, warm-up routines before and discussion after the drama build confidence and stimulate student experimentation.

One way to get started is to dramatize a setting in which a crowd of people would ordinarily be gathered—each carrying on her own business. Favorite settings for crowd-scene improvisations are marketplaces (usually either foreign or historical), airports, public beaches, prison camps, parks, street corners, carnivals, or offices. The class talks together about the scene, and players make up roles and typical actions for themselves, suggesting things that might happen in that setting. Then the drama begins, and each student acts the way her chosen character would, interacting with the others when appropriate.

You can side-coach.You can feed in directions as stimuli without breaking the action. Players do not pause or look at the coach but simply react in role to the stimulus. Capitalize on some promising bit of action already under way by calling the others' attention to it. "Oh, it looks like this man is getting cheated over here. Do you notice? How do you feel about that?" By this means you can help players integrate the scene and parlay some improvisation into more.

You might talk the whole group into a mood, using your voice itself to induce a particular state: "It's getting toward quitting time now, and you're getting weary and feeling hungry. Your movements slow down, and you begin to think about going home and settling in, but you have to keep going and you fight the temptation to give in early. You don't feel very patient, but you try to pay attention and keep working." The idea of this mood may come to the coach because the scene needs slowing down or simply would benefit from a change of action level.

You might side-coach just one individual or a subgroup. Given, for example, the mood just induced, you could say: "You two by the door, you're gossiping, it looks like. You're gossiping about some of the others. You look around, and you smile as if there's a secret between you. You're setting yourselves apart, drawing attention, and you seem up while everybody else is running down." Such reflecting feeds back and suggests at the same time.

Create changes to see what happens. Later, players can discuss how they were affected by these directions and whether they were a good idea or not. Give play to your own inspiration; students will respond in kind, and some will learn to coach too.

If you see that a group seems to be losing energy, you can stop the drama and ask them for a decision that can revitalize their commitment. "Should we make some changes now?" They can alter the main scene or shuffle roles a bit. Pausing and re-starting is in the nature of improvisation, which is one kind of composition.[3]

■ THE MINIMAL SITUATION

A minimal situation is the briefest possible statement of character and event for players of a certain experience to get an improvisation under way. This is the "given" on which the players build. The difference between improvisation and enactment is necessarily a matter of degree only, since there are always some "givens," suggestive ideas that are the starting point for acting out. In improvising, one makes up more of the story as she goes along; when enacting, one has more details specified in advance.

Since young children's inventions tend to be drawn so much from familiar stories anyway, the distinction breaks down even more at that age. The younger the child, the more givens there will need to be. Nevertheless, launching even young children from a minimal situation rather than from a known story does place them further along the way toward individual creativity. Since they have less to go on, they must heed carefully the actions and words of others, because these cue their responses.

There are several sources of minimal situations: (1) original student ideas; (2) situations drawn from reading; and (3) situations embodying moral, social, or psychological issues.

ORIGINAL STUDENT IDEAS

For students of any age, a good beginning in dialogue is for a pair to role-play any two people, such as an interviewer and a politician, a parent and a teacher having a conference about a pupil, or brothers arguing. An activity card can show a photograph of two people talking together in particular surroundings and invite students to imagine what they are talking about. After experience with these duets, students can think of other situations involving three or more people. A high school student who has just borrowed the family car without permission is facing her parents afterwards. A family is arguing about which TV program to watch. Relatives have got together to tell an alcoholic that she must go for treatment. A single-parent mother is trying to lay down rules to her rebellious teenage daughters. A crowd of neighbors suddenly want a couple to sell their home.

An improvisation may begin with students writing on three separate slips of paper a setting, a problem, and a character. Then the papers are mixed up, and each small group draws one setting and one problem for the group, and one character for each player, and improvises a drama. Another stimulus is to write sentences that must be used as either the opening or the closing line in a dialogue. Each pair or trio is given a sentence written by another group, such as, "Things will never be the same around here from now on" or "He just goes to pieces when

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[3] For more ways to keep large-group drama going, see Betty Jane Wagner, *Dorothy Heathcote: Drama as a Learning Medium* (Washington, DC: National Education Association, 1976).

that happens." Or students can make up fairly definite character profiles, such as "You are an aging dancer depressed by the death of your one close friend." Whether the players work out the setting, characters, and main action before or after they start improvising depends on how ready they feel to plunge in.

Veteran improvisers can start with almost no givens, with the most minimal situation, such as one of us was once given in an acting class: "You want the chair here and she wants it over there." The understanding is that whatever setting, circumstances, and identities the actors establish for themselves as they go along must be maintained from then on. (The two of us became interior decorators who disagreed over the arrangement of a client's room.) In a workshop situation, where players take turns acting and watching, a scene may be stopped and discussed. The onlooking players may make suggestions or take over the scene themselves for a while. Mature improvisers can also replay each improvisation as a comedy, a serious drama, a dance presentation, an operetta, a melodrama, and so on.

Another form of spontaneous invention, one that even elementary children can succeed at, despite its obvious difficulty, represents rhetorical practice at its most elemental. One actor goes out of hearing while partners give a brief direction to another actor. The direction simply stipulates the effect one actor is to produce on the one who is out of the room, using any means except physical contact: "Make her laugh"; "Make her thoughtful or sober"; "Startle (or cheer) her." The person who was sent out of the room simply returns and reacts spontaneously. The other's means of getting the desired effect from her may be many—making up anecdotes, asking questions, flattering, launching into commentary, drawing the other into an exchange about a certain topic, and, of course, some body English.

These sorts of free improvisation develop fluent invention that will help many other verbal activities—talking, writing, acting out scripts, and even reading. A group improvising an original situation composes it by doing different versions until it is wrought to the members' satisfaction. Then they may collaborate in writing it down in play format, as dialogue and stage directions, or in transcribing it if they have recorded it.[4]

SITUATIONS FROM READING

This obviously extends "creative dramatics" toward freer and more various use of texts. Improvising, either before or after the reading, is an effective way of working with literature and history that will improve understanding of silent reading. Students make a minimal situation out of a scene or relationship they find in a true or fictional story. They want to understand it better, apply it to other people and settings, or otherwise explore it. Perhaps they are still reading the text.

Before students have seen a certain text they plan to read, they can ask you or other students who have read it to abstract in advance a key scene, such as the scene in *Julius Caesar* in which Cassius tries to persuade Brutus to join the conspiracy to kill Caesar. A is trying to talk B into helping kill a mutual friend for the good of their group. A number of key interactions from a work can be improvised

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[4] We are much indebted to Viola Spolin for many of the ideas presented in this chapter. See the excellent sourcebook: Viola Spolin, *Improvisation for the Theater* (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1963, 1977, 1983).

in this way so that students have experienced the structure or dynamics of them before actually reading the text.

A scene merely alluded to in a play or piece of fiction (an off-stage action) can be improvised from the slight references made to it, the students drawing on their understanding of the rest of the work in order to create the scene the author did not present directly. This raises good issues of reading comprehension. Exploring other possibilities of a text makes the author's choices meaningful. And players have to think about motivations and relationships in order to act their roles. Discussions of interpretation inevitably arise en route, and these discussions are practical, not arbitrary. Changing roles and replaying a scene is another way to deepen that understanding.

Some fairy tales, legends, myths, parables, historical events, and scriptural stories come down to us so condensed as to cry out for elaboration. This is not a fault, because they compel us to use our imagination to fill them out. For this reason many make good minimal situations. Again, players invent what is missing—the details of dialogue and action—on the basis of what is there. Improvisation translates such summary of *what happened* into *what is happening*. This makes the abstraction of the story come alive in the present. So if the material is literary, students can make it their own, and if it's historical, they can enter the past. Sometimes players may feel that they don't have enough to go on because the material comes from a very different time and place. The problem becomes a reason for research.

Expanding myths and historical events through improvisation repeats, in effect, what the great dramatists have done with them in writing. Dramatizing involves a slowing of pace, compared to narrative, a living through of an experience at life rate. As students expand summary action through improvisation, they see the values and the possibilities of elaborating dialogue, gesture, and sensory data. Expanding kernel stories helps youngsters learn to fill in detail in their own writing and to grasp an important relationship in literature: drama elaborates narrative, and narrative summarizes drama.

SITUATIONS EMBODYING MORAL, SOCIAL, OR PSYCHOLOGICAL ISSUES

Improvising scenes with characters drawn from real life is often called role-playing. "Playing the Problem" can be the name of an activity card for improvising a situation drawn from the experience of students and people they know or from such reading as advice columns. One family member is reading another's personal mail. A parent favors one child over others or blames everything on one child. A beloved person won't admit addiction. A spouse feels she has suffered enough to warrant divorce. Players do successive improvisations, changing factors, rotating roles, and discussing issues and solutions. This allows the problem to be examined and turned round to reveal many faces.

When ready, students can move to larger institutions than the family—hospitals, political parties, corporation offices, educational institutions, governmental agencies, legislative bodies, and so on. For example, students might set up a scene in a company office where a chief executive officer, her legal counsel, and a couple of vice presidents are debating whether to render a product or a service in such a way that it makes more profits but risks the health of consumers or the state of the environment.

One high school teacher[5] reports a good response from her students who play a problem in small groups with these directions: "Decide together on a moral position or deep conviction that a person might hold. Then put a character who holds that position into a situation in which she is pressed to act counter to her belief." Situations her students chose: a student believes "the clothes make the man" but finds herself falling in love with a sloppy guy; a defense attorney who firmly believes that the end does not justify the means argues the case of a radical who has murdered for a cause.

Minimal situations such as these lead into, or become a kind of, topic-centered discussion, which occurs in incidental talk generated while setting up a minimal situation or while evaluating different versions of a scene. Or a situation may be one in which characters representing different viewpoints are deliberating some issue they have to reach a decision about such as whether to invite a certain type of person to become a member. The scene is dramatic, because a fictional situation motivates the exchanges, but the improvisation closely resembles mock panels. These panels, incidentally, might comprise historical personages anachronistically assembled to address an issue of today. (What would Nat Turner, Marie Antoinette, Thomas Jefferson, and Harriet Tubman say about the liberation of black women?) Mock panels help induce awareness of how our ideas are rooted in our roles and characters.

Student dramas, like adult literature, illustrate some common human experience. They have a theme, and thus they provide a natural topic for small-group discussion. If topic talk and improvisation are coordinated, a very powerful learning will result, because ideas can then be dealt with at two levels of abstraction. By improvising the instances that come up in topic discussion, students can go from generality to example, and by discussing the material of improvisations they can go from example to generality. At any time you or the students can distill an issue from the drama work and propose it as a topic for small group discussion, or explore a topic by improvising a case of it.

This movement between generality and example, like the movement between drama and narrative, constitutes a vital issue in thinking and writing and therefore also a major educational goal. Improvisation and discussion are the ends of a spectrum. Minimal situations can lead either way, into forum as well as drama, because the dialectic of discussion and the dynamics of drama are profoundly related.

THE DRAMA WORKSHOP

Although most dramatic work occurs in self-directed working parties, as for other activities, regular whole-class warm-ups and occasional workshops for the entire class can be helpful, especially as students are getting used to drama. Or perhaps you see no way of having some students do drama without disturbing others who are doing quiet activities. So you might sometimes set aside a drama period for all. This can have a general structure that creates a sense of order and purpose but allows for a variety of current projects. For example, the entire group begins by

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[5] Robin Hinderyckx, Evanston Township High School, Evanston, Illinois.

doing a few warm-ups and concentration activities together then some pantomime ideas for everyone to try out simultaneously, often suggested from the floor.

Depending on what the current projects are, the next phase of the drama period can consist of small-group work such as charades, improvising from a minimal situation, acting out an unscripted story, or rehearsing a scripted scene from a play. You circulate among groups. This small-group work might last until the end of the period, but sometimes the whole class could be reassembled to watch some groups put on scenes or to coordinate the groups if they are working on parts of a whole.

Like a writing workshop, a drama workshop is a working party in which members present their efforts to each other and provide each other with helpful response. A valuable part is the discussion that goes on between versions as the group tries out various interpretations. The purpose of comments is to reflect what the improvisation looks like from the outside and to widen the range of possibilities. One of the main values of improvisation is the exploring of differences—differences, for example, between two-way and three-way relationships, in pace and rhythm, in language styles of different speakers, in the dynamics and balances of interaction, in settings and circumstances, in the order of acts, in behavior strategies. (All of these are aspects of both literature and real life.)

If an improvisation seems lifeless and forced, the commentators need not make negative remarks about the acting. Taking their cue from you, they suggest changes in the variables of the situation and in the casting. Sometimes, for example, if a scene is revolving repetitiously or keeps falling into pauses, it may help to suggest another ploy that A can use on B, or to propose that the two players reverse roles for a while. If seeking alternatives is customary, then proposing changes will not be taken personally.

You set the tenor for students' cross-commentary when you give personal responses while dropping in on a group: "The clerk seems very annoyed, but the customer doesn't seem to notice that." Your chief role may be to ask "What if...?" questions about all the variables that they might change—setting, timing, casting, number of parts, kinds of relationships, tone, and so on. You might suggest things the actors may not have thought of: "Why don't you try it in another setting?" or "What would happen if the son asked his father before the mother entered the room?"

Students can learn from your example how to respond sensitively and helpfully. There is no secret other than to watch closely and keep all of yourself open to what's happening. Be patient about letting students work things out if they seem able to. Members of a workshop work come to identify strongly with each other and want each other to improve because they depend on learning together how to get better. Show them how to make everybody succeed.[6]

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[6] We are indebted to Rose Feinberg and Floren Harpen for particular teaching suggestions in this chapter. See Gay Hendricks and Russel Mills, *The Centering Book* (Englewood Cliffs, NJ: Prentice-Hall, 1975, 1989). This book provides excellent exercises to help learners of all ages focus, relax, and balance mind and body. It relates usefully to many recommendations in this text but especially to those in this chapter and Chapter 8.