

Curtain Calls

Drama and performing arts activity ideas.

Two “Acting Up” Exercises

Reading and/or performing a short skit is one way to go with your drama activities - drama games and improvisational exercises is another. “Real actors” use these techniques to warm up at the beginning of a class, get into character, and improve their skills. But they can be fun for anyone, even if you are not a star. Try the following two exercises with your group this month.

Tip: Doing exercises like these can be a great way to ease into a performance group. Once people become comfortable with doing improv exercises, they will often be willing to try a short skit.

Exercise #1 – Crazy Characters in a Cab

This exercise involves pretending you are a famous person/character in the back of a New York City taxi and doing it so convincingly that the audience can guess your identity.

Props & Preparations

1. Arrange 3 chairs in a row (backseat of a taxi)
2. Write the names of famous people or characters on slips of paper and place them in a basket or bowl. They can be cartoon characters, actors, politicians, etc., but they should be easily recognizable. If you want, get input from the group. Some possibilities include:
 - Superman
 - Daffy or Donald Duck
 - Marilyn Monroe
 - Albert Einstein
 - Hillary Clinton
 - Julia Child
 - Walter Cronkite
 - Bing Crosby
 - Lucille Ball
 - George Burns
 - Gracie Allen



Tip: Actors who are up to the challenge can play characters of the opposite gender if they wish, or you can have two baskets/bowls separating male and female characters.

How It Goes

1. Ask the group to imagine that the three chairs are the backseat of a taxicab in New York City.
2. Ask three people to pick names from the basket/bowl, being sure not to share their new identity with anyone else. If an actor does not recognize the name on the slip of paper, he/she can choose another name.
3. Give the three actors a few minutes to think about their character. They can share their identities with each other and come up with some dialogue. During this time, present some questions for them to consider.
 - Does your character have a trademark voice, gesture, or prop that is unique and recognizable?
 - Where is your character going in New York City? Why are you there?
 - Remember, you are in a taxicab in New York City – what gestures or actions are appropriate to sitting in a cab? Feel free to mime putting on a seatbelt, opening and closing a window, or taking photos as you see the sights.
4. This is the fun part. The three actors now improvise any antics, conversations, or interactions that might befall these characters as they share a cab in New York City.
5. The audience gets to participate! Audience members try to guess the characters in the taxi. If they think they have figured out a character, they shout, “Stop!” and make their guess.

Tip: Sometimes it's better to let the actors improvise for a while before shouting, “Stop,” even if an audience member has a guess. This allows the actors to develop a scene and the audience to really enjoy their performance.

Example

Here are some sample lines, which you can share with the group to show how the exercise might go. See if the group can guess the characters.

MAN (*in a very macho, masculine voice*): These New York cabbies sure like to squeeze people in. It's tighter than a telephone booth in here. I'm caught! (*Pretends to be pulling on something as if it is caught in the door.*)

WOMAN #1 (*in a high, warbly voice*): Well, I've had just the most delightful time in New York, absolutely delightful. First, I visited Chez Mangez-Vous, the finest French restaurant in New York, where I dined on the most delicious Coq au Vin.

WOMAN #2 (*in a sexy voice*): I adore New York too. Driver, can you drop me off at Tiffany's? I need to pick up some diamonds.

WOMAN #1: Ohhh, Tiffany's is right next to another favorite restaurant. I must get their recipe for chocolate parfait for my next book.

MAN: Stop! Isn't that man mugging that poor lady? I'll be right back. (*Opens the door, leaves, and comes back a few seconds later.*)

WOMAN #2 (*Grabbing the man's arm and talking almost in a whisper*): Oh, you are so strong. It's an asphalt jungle out there. (*Batting her eyelashes.*) Do you prefer blonds?

"STOP!" (**Group:** *Can you guess the characters in the cab?*)

MAN: Superman

WOMAN #1: Julia Child

WOMAN #2: Marilyn Monroe

Group Variation

Instead of asking people to play individual parts, divide your group into two teams. Each team writes a script and the other team tries to guess the characters in the cab.

Exercise #2 – Magic Stuff

This exercise involves the silent (except for the occasional chuckles or ah-ha moments) miming of an imagined object.

Props & Preparations

1. Bring in a basket or box to "hold" your pretend "magic stuff." (There is no real magic stuff. The magic stuff is an imaginary and invisible lump of clay that you hold in your hands. You can fashion it into any object you choose.)
2. If you think your group will have trouble coming up with their own ideas of things to mime, write some possibilities on slips of paper and put them in a bowl for people to draw.
3. Arrange chairs in a circle so that everyone is in plain sight of each other.



How It Goes

1. At the start of the activity, introduce the amazing, all-powerful, all-purpose, and all-natural, magic stuff. Heighten the fun by hyping up the magic stuff, saying, "I have a surprise for you. I sent away for a new product called 'magic stuff,' and it's amazing, it will blow your mind." Then open up a box or bag, reach in, and "draw out" the imaginary magic stuff. Then you can ask, "Does everybody see it? Isn't it beautiful? Isn't it amazing?" Or say, "This magic stuff is priceless, so we don't want to drip any of it on the

carpet.” You can really get into the magic stuff, making it seem as real as anything else in the room.

2. Demonstrate its magic qualities by holding your empty palm up to the group and miming. Perhaps you pretend to let it slip through your fingers and you rush to gather it up before it drips onto the floor; or maybe you stretch it and knead it, or even blow it up like a balloon.
3. After you’ve demonstrated and mimed the amazing elastic properties of the magic stuff, explain the exercise and give an example. “As you hold it in your hands, mold it into an everyday object that only you know. Perhaps you choose a bow and arrow. Once you have molded your object, mime or demonstrate how it’s used. For example, load your arrow, pull back the string, aim, and let it fly.”
4. Ask the others in the group to watch closely as the person molds the object (in this case a bow and arrow) and demonstrates it. Ask them to guess what the object is.
5. After the object has been revealed, the person punches, folds, or otherwise returns the magic stuff back into a hand-held ball and passes it on to the next person.
6. Now it’s this person’s turn to play with the magic stuff. They can mold it in whatever fashion they like, create an object, and demonstrate its use, while the observers pay attention and try to figure out what the object is. Once the object is revealed, the magic stuff is returned to a hand-held ball, and passed to the next person.
7. The exercise ends when everyone in the circle has had a chance to play with the magic stuff, the lump comes back to you, and you put it away into its box or bag or your pocket until the time comes to play again.



Some “Magic Stuff” Possibilities

People have molded horses, chopsticks, tennis rackets, fire hoses, baby dolls, umbrellas, televisions, and spaceships. Anything goes. The goal is to let your imagination run free and have fun.