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Get on Stage!

21 sketches and plays for young learners and teens

Introduction

What is *Get on Stage!* all about?

We have written this book as a response to requests we have frequently heard at language teaching conferences in a variety of countries worldwide. In conversations about what materials colleagues would find useful to support their work, we have often heard requests for ready-made scripts for plays for students to act out. Teachers look for plays that students can perform for each other or in front of a ‘real’ audience of some sort – be it another class, a group of parents, and/or the school community, at a school fete or maybe at the end of the year. We are using the term ‘play’ in a generic way here – we mean a range of scripts of different lengths, genres, with different language levels and preparation required.

The plays have been carefully created for young and teenage students (see the introduction to each play). They are easy to stage as they do not require a lot of props – sometimes none at all – and they make it possible for you to involve a large number of students. The introductory notes at the beginning give further suggestions as to how extra students can take part in a play, e.g. by splitting longer roles so that two or more students can play them.

The structure of the book

Get on Stage! has four chapters. Chapter 1 has nine short humorous sketches, each of about five minutes’ runtime. There is also one longer sketch (*At the Doctor’s*) that has six scenes; however, each of these scenes is a short, self-contained sketch in itself, meaning that you can use the play in a very flexible way. Your students may want to act out just one of the scenes, or several, or all of them.

Chapters 2 and 3 contain plays of medium length (about five to ten minutes, depending on the production). In Chapter 2 you will find three humorous contemporary sketches, and in Chapter 3 five plays based on traditional stories.

The last chapter contains three modern teen dramas; whereas the sketches and plays in Chapters 1–3 can also be used with younger learners, these dramas are specifically for students aged 14–18. For each of the sketches and plays, you are given not only the script but also an introduction. This gives you an overview of the roles and the set and props you may want to use for the performance; then comes a brief description of the style and the synopsis of each play to help you choose the right script for your class.

Although the plays are not written to present or practise any particular areas of language, you may find it useful to know roughly what language level your students would need to have acquired to be able to act out the play confidently. So, for easy reference we have given you a description of the expected language level according to the Common European Framework (e.g. Intermediate – B1). Depending on the play, and without any attempt at systematic or comprehensive coverage, we have given some brief listings of examples of, e.g., exponents from certain functional areas, grammar structures, vocabulary sets or high frequency chunks of language.

Introduction

Finally, the introduction to each play gives you stage tips and suggestions for variations. The stage tips provide you with practical suggestions on staging a play or sketch, enabling your students to get the most out of their performance. In the variations sections you can find alternative ideas about what you might do with a sketch or play.



***Get on Stage!* comes with a DVD and an Audio CD.**

The DVD

The DVD gives you:

Tips and guidelines for staging and performing a play

The excerpt on the DVD shows Matt Devitt, co-author of *Get on Stage!* and also a theatre director, rehearsing the sketch *Being Polite* (Chapter 1, pp 56–61) with a group of teenage actors. The excerpt shows you different ways of helping your students improve their performance, and focuses on topics that are discussed on pp 18–33 of this introduction: Voice projection; Staging and ‘blocking’; Concentration and focus; Building the characters to tell your story; Pace; Set, props, lights, music and sound effects; Changing scenes; and Remembering or learning lines.

We are convinced that the practical tips on the DVD will be of great help in bringing the relevant part of the introduction to life and serve as a good model for your own interventions when rehearsing a play. You may want to watch the excerpt after reading the introduction, then go back and watch it again before you start acting out a play or sketch with your students to remind you of some of the key principles of staging and performing a play. Please note that due to the live nature of the filming, the examples on the DVD do not always follow the order as shown in the introduction.

Video recordings of three sample plays

These plays are acted out on stage by British students. They are:

- *Being Polite* (a short sketch – Chapter 1, pp 56–61),
- *The Space Restaurant* (a medium-length sketch, pp 106–113),
- and *Rusty Nail Soup* (a medium-length play based on a traditional story, pp 127–132)

There is also a short example on the DVD of a ‘split scene’ technique, demonstrated in a short extract from *Friendship*.

You can show your students the sample plays on these videos for the following purposes:

- 1) to give them a general idea of how to act out a sketch or a play under normal conditions, i.e. in a classroom or on a school stage without using elaborate props.
- 2) to give them role models that you can refer to in your own rehearsals. When a student finds it difficult, for example, to project their voice so it can be heard well by the audience, it could be a good idea to play a short extract from one of the videos to the student and ask them to practise by imitating it sentence by sentence.
- 3) if you are planning to get your students to act out one of those three plays, you can show it to them on the DVD, to demonstrate, for example, how the actors use the

Introduction

stage and interact with one another.

- 4) alternatively, you could show one or all of these plays in order to give your students some key principles of putting on a play. If you want to do that, we specially recommend *Being Polite*, as the DVD not only shows you a performance of the play by English students, but also gives you examples of how Matt Devitt works with a group of young teenagers and helps them improve their performance. There is another short scene from *Friendship* (a modern teen drama – Chapter 4, pp 172–181); the purpose of this extract is to show you the use of a ‘split scene’ technique that is used not only in *Friendship* itself, but also in another play in this book, *Good Girl*.



The Audio CD

The Audio CD offers you:

Audio recordings of eleven plays

These plays are spoken in a studio by British children or teenagers. They are:

- Track 01** *The Perfect Son*, Chapter 1 pp 36–39
- Track 02** *Smart Shoppers*, Chapter 1 pp 40–42
- Track 03** *A Fast-Food Stall*, Chapter 1 pp 43–47
- Track 04** *Colin the Poet*, Chapter 1 pp 48–52
- Track 05** *The Ticket*, Chapter 1 pp 53–55
- Track 06** *Parrot Learns a Lesson*, Chapter 1 pp 62–65
- Track 07** *Granddad's Birthday*, Chapter 1 pp 66–70
- Track 08** *The Princess and the Ring*, Chapter 1 pp 71–76
- Track 09** *On Holiday in Rome*, Chapter 2 pp 88–95
- Track 10** *The Wise Woman*, Chapter 3 pp 116–121
- Track 11** *Friendship*, Chapter 4 pp 172–181

You can use the audio recordings of the sample plays for the following purposes:

- 1) to develop your students' listening comprehension. For that purpose you might want to use the comprehension tasks that you can find on the worksheets that go with the plays. You can find these on the DVD.
- 2) the audio recordings can, like the video samples, be used to give students role models that you can refer to in your own rehearsals.
- 3) if you are planning to get your students to act out one of those plays, you can use the audio recording to help develop their pronunciation and intonation.
- 4) if you are planning to get your students to act out *Friendship*, you will see in the script (pp 174–181) that we recommend the use of some extracts from pop songs in order to enrich the performance. You may want to encourage your students to select the music that they think is appropriate for the play (see some ideas and also suggestions for songs in the script). Alternatively, you can use some of the short original soundtracks on the CD (tracks 12–16).

Introduction

Photocopiable worksheets

In the appendix of the book you can find a wide range of worksheets. Thumbnails in the introductions to the plays give you a quick overview of the tasks, and remind you of the existence of the worksheets.

- For each of the short plays, there is one photocopiable worksheet containing three activities. These are:
 - an activity that helps students with the comprehension of the play. This can be reading or listening (the latter is possible for all those plays where there is an audio or video recording), and
 - activities for working on the language; for example, vocabulary/chunks of language and/or grammar structures from the script.
- For most of the medium and longer plays there are two pages of photocopiable worksheets giving your students practice in reading and/or listening comprehension, vocabulary, useful phrases, grammar and creative writing.

Why get young learners and teens to act out plays?

In discussions with colleagues, we have frequently heard about the motivational power of plays. We have heard beautiful stories of how parents of children proudly watch a play where their son or daughter appears on stage, and as a result develop more positive attitudes towards their child's school, their child's foreign language learning – and often their teacher as well! We have also heard that otherwise rather inactive teens can suddenly show remarkable amounts of energy when creating props, masks, or costumes, and they can be prepared to rehearse for long hours in order to get the language right. They are happy to listen time and time again to audio recordings of a play so that they can improve their own intonation and pronunciation, and they show remarkable social skills in working together on its preparation. Colleagues who get their students to act out plays have also told us that when they meet their students – sometimes years after they have left school – they often still have fond memories of the day of a special performance.

There is also increasing evidence from cognitive research that supports the use of plays. Learning a foreign language successfully is about taking ownership of it. Our students are learning English as a *foreign language*, but we want to do everything we can to reduce the emotional distance between them and that language. Ownership is about reducing the 'foreignness' of the language to be learnt, about bringing it closer to our students' hearts, getting them to enjoy the new language as a means of expressing themselves, playing with it, and identifying its sounds and intonation patterns. Such processes of identification, imitation and creative play are part and parcel of how children acquire their mother tongue ... surely no mother in the whole wide world would ever go into her child's bedroom in the morning and announce, with a big smile, 'Get up my darling – today we're doing the Present Perfect Progressive!' When we

Introduction

are young, we imitate sounds, we play with words, and we act out roles – activities that help children to rehearse important social behaviour, understand how humans act and interact with one another, gain insights into their own behaviour and develop their personality.

Children naturally engage in highly sophisticated ‘let’s pretend’ games, often getting completely absorbed in acting out all kinds of roles that are familiar to them (their mum or dad, a shopkeeper, a policeman), or that they dream up in their imagination. Acting out such roles helps the children to develop their language competences, and their imagination and creativity.

When children become teenagers they go through the challenging phase of adolescence. Now they may appear to be far less prepared to take part in spontaneous role-play activities than they were as young children. However, adolescence is a time of inner fantasy and play. It is at this time of their lives that students need to develop their sense of self – their identity – and identification with role models is part of that process. In their imagination, teens often ‘become’ the heroes and heroines they admire, and imitate the way they dress, talk, think and act. These heroes and heroines are often the stars of the glitz and glamour of the movie or pop industries, successful sports players or other public figures. Cool teen behaviour in fact is often about imitating others, and a way of pretending that life is anything but difficult during a time when they are often (despite their cool appearance) rather insecure.

We have quite often noticed that adolescents are more than happy to engage in role-play activities. You as a teacher can support this by making sure the atmosphere in the teen classroom is a supportive one, as ridiculing each other is unfortunately a common teen phenomenon. It is worth pointing out to students that you will give them enough time to study their lines and rehearse their performance, as it is important for teens to feel ‘safe’ in their roles.

The importance of good stories

What are the elements that make a story appropriate for young learners or teenagers? Kieran Egan stresses that by offering the right stories to children a teacher can contribute greatly to the development of their ‘cognitive tools’. Stories can support these processes best if they offer strong emotional contrasts, e.g. good vs bad, happy vs sad, foolish vs serious, greedy vs cunning etc. The child needs such stories to be able to develop their own value system and in order to learn what is appropriate and acceptable behaviour and what isn’t. As Kieran Egan points out: ‘The story form is a cultural universal; everyone everywhere enjoys stories. The story, then, is not just some casual entertainment; it reflects a basic and powerful form in which we make sense of the world and experience’ (*Teaching as Story Telling*, University of Chicago Press,

Introduction

1998). Teachers frequently notice that although children learn fast they tend to forget even faster. Offering stories – or, in this case, plays – that are relevant to your students means that students are more likely to remember them, and consequently will also remember the language in a story or play more easily.

As Earl Stevick stresses, most of the sensory information reaching the brain is quickly forgotten. The ‘deeper’ a sentence is rooted in a student’s brain/mind system, the higher the chances that the student will be able to use the language stored later in life. (Earl W. Stevick, *Memory, Meaning & Method*, Second Edition, Heinle & Heinle Publishers, Boston 1996 p. 196)

When students listen to, read or watch a good story, they can become totally absorbed in it, and in their imagination they often become part of the story themselves. When they’re acting out a story in the form of a play, the process of identification can become even stronger; they can get so fully engaged in the play that they forget about everything else.

Teenagers go through a phase of changes that is often characterised by a growing interest in the real world. Adolescence is usually a time of emotional turmoil as well. According to insights explained in the educational theories of Kieran Egan, teens – as cool as they may seem on the surface – often feel, deep down, threatened by the world. One reason for their insecurity is the fact that they have no answers to questions they ask themselves. Those questions are of an existentially threatening nature, basically because teens cannot find any answers to them: *Will I be successful in life? Will I be able to find a good job and earn good money one day? When will my parents die? When will I die? What happens when I do? Who will miss me when I die?* etc. Although the world of teens is fundamentally a contact culture, they hardly ever share their real fears with others, and this often leads to a feeling of loneliness and the assumption that they are the only ones in the world suffering from their problems. To them, the only way out of this situation seems to lie in trying *not* to be an individual – not an easy task given that the particular phase in their lives is also about developing their sense of self, their identity – and so they engage in copying each other: wearing the same brands of T-shirts and trainers, adoring the same kind of heroes and heroines, and finding the same kind of things either ‘awesome’ or ‘gross’ (current UK teen expressions for ‘good’ and ‘bad’). Such behaviour, together with their choice of heroes, often seem to suggest superficiality to the adult observer. But it’s anything but! When teens choose their idols, they do so because they feel intuitively connected with what they perceive as the best human qualities through their heroes, whereas for adults every single one of those stars may well be representative of a tinsel world. Why the difference? Teens project onto their heroes the qualities they believe are needed in order to successfully master the challenges of a threatening world, and whereas it may be true that some of those heroes are pretty scandalous and superficial people themselves, the qualities teens see in them are important human values: love, courage, creativity, tolerance, endurance, engagement, solidarity, passion, and

Introduction

especially the ability to have got themselves into a place where they are admired and approved of by a great number of other people – something that many teens seek for themselves.

It is through projection and identification that teens get into contact with those apparently superhuman qualities, and gradually discover that they themselves have some of those qualities within them.

Taking such processes seriously and selecting content in the form of stories that support teenagers' natural search for positive human qualities and values will lead to more emotional engagement and hence higher levels of motivation in otherwise reluctant students. In addition, it helps develop the students' own cognitive tools by encouraging them to understand that all human knowledge and achievement was once just a dream in someone's mind.

Teachers of teenage students frequently notice that it is difficult to get their students to talk about things that relate to themselves – this, in spite of the fact that teachers know that personalisation is an important tool for learning a foreign language successfully. Teens, however, don't often want to talk about themselves, and as their teachers or parents we have to accept that and try to gently guide them through this insecure stage. One way of doing that is using drama activities because they offer students rich opportunities to 'hide behind a character'. They know that their audience knows that what they are saying is not what they think, and that it is someone else's lines they are acting out.

So when teens act out a role they are not talking as themselves; yet the process of identification with the role makes it possible for them to develop a feeling of ownership during the period of rehearsing and acting out a play. The modern teen dramas in *Get on Stage!* are developed to do exactly that – they give students the opportunity to 'step out' of their own situation, and to experiment, reflect on and familiarise themselves with a variety of behaviours, attitudes and beliefs as they act as someone else, yet bring to that role their own thoughts and emotions.

The content of these plays makes it easy to grab students' attention, and consequently the content of the plays becomes more memorable. When students remember the content of a play well, the chances are that the language too will stick in their long-term memory better. And finally, good plays are far more likely to trigger responses from students, enlivening lessons and creating a more positive experience all round.

How to cast a play

Teachers casting a play are frequently torn between the crucial question of whether to choose the best actors for each role so that the drama comes fully alive, or whether to use the play as an educational tool where it isn't just the performance that counts (as a means of impressing the audience), but the process that leads up to the performance. It is important to keep in mind here that acting out a play is a holistic process where

Introduction

everyone taking part in it is very important to its success. The performance by a very shy student who finally manages to speak two lines in the play in a way that exceeds the student's own expectation of what they would ever be able to achieve may seem insignificant within the performance as such – but it might well be a massive step forward in the development of that particular student. You can be sure that the piece (whether a short sketch or a longer play) is written in such a way that it will work even if not every child in your class is a born actor. Most of the plays in *Get on Stage!* offer lots of opportunities for every child in your class to contribute to the play without feeling intimidated.

There are several options you can use if you want to cast a play:

1) Let the individual students choose.

If you want to leave it to your students to choose what roles they want to play, you could work first on the comprehension of the script and do some language work with the worksheets at the end of the book, and then simply ask who would like to act out which role. This is a very 'democratic' process, but it may not be ideal for the shyer students, especially in an adolescent class. They may not want to step forward and ask for a role, much as they might like to be part of the cast. In this context, it would not be unusual for those students who tend to be more extrovert to get all the roles.

2) The decisions are made by you.

Choosing the roles beforehand without asking your students allows you to find a match between what you think would be the right role for each of your students and what would be best for the performance in general.

You can also use the performance of a play as an opportunity for your students to grow personally, by selecting students because you believe it would be good for their personal development. By telling a shy student 'I'd like you to play this part because I think you'll be good', you may be putting pressure on them – but this may be the gentle push needed by that student to make the next important step in their own development and hence be the right thing to do sometimes. On the other hand, you may feel that a student is not yet ready to appear on the stage. There is no point in forcing a student to take part in a performance if they are not at all keen. If you come across a student who refuses to play a role you have selected, it could be a good idea to ask them questions (in a non-judgemental way) about their reasons. It may then turn out that giving that student another task – whether it is about making props, being responsible for the lights during the performance or something else – is the right thing to go for, and this would be an entirely valid pedagogical decision, as that student can still contribute something useful and valuable to the success of the play.

One way to involve a student linguistically without forcing them into performing is for them to act as 'prompt' during rehearsals and performances. This means they follow the script whilst the other students are rehearsing and, when a line is

Introduction

forgotten, they provide the prompt and read out the forgotten line. This task could be shared from rehearsal to rehearsal. Accepted protocol for this requires that the prompter only prompts when they hear the struggling actor say 'line' – this is in order to avoid a situation where an actor, pausing for dramatic effect, has their 'moment' ruined by an over-zealous prompter bellowing out the next line before being asked!

3) Let the class decide.

This third option is one that requires a fairly high level of maturity within your students. It will be suitable if you have a very good rapport with your class and, if the students themselves have a good rapport with each other – a classroom culture that usually needs to be developed. By showing your students that the selection process should not just be a matter of who makes themselves heard first and loudest when you ask who wants to play which role, the process of choosing roles can gradually become a valuable experience for your students in which they learn to make informed decisions and reflect on what are to become their rather than your choices.

You could start such a process by brainstorming criteria for the selection with your students, and writing them on the board, e.g. *Who **didn't** get a part the last time round when the class acted out a play? Who would you like to suggest for a role because you think it would be a good experience for **them**? Who has never had a part in a play?* etc. In order to avoid the more extrovert students always getting the roles they want, you could then ask students to write on a piece of paper which role they would like to play. One student collects all the names, and writes them alphabetically on the board – underneath the name of the character they want to act out. The choice is then up to the students, and they need to decide in group or whole-class discussions. This process will require more time, discipline and the ability to reflect on decision making and choice on the part of your students – but it is in itself a very valuable activity if carried out in the foreign language.

How to choose a play for your class

While you know best what kind of play is likely to be most suitable for your class, *Get on Stage!* gives you quite a bit of information about each one, supporting you in making appropriate choices. In the introduction for each play, you will find information about the estimated runtime, the props required, and the language level that a particular play is for. You will also see – indicated by the icons in the margin – whether there is an audio or video recording of the play you are thinking of choosing, and see thumbnails of the worksheets to aid comprehension and support the language work you are planning to do.

You will want to make yourself familiar with the content of the plays before choosing. You can use the synopses to pre-select the plays to shortlist for your class. The age of

Introduction

your students is another important criterion; younger students may love to act out a humorous sketch, while a teenage class may be keener on acting out a play based on a traditional story – or may prefer the dramatic, soap-opera-like quality of one of the modern teen plays, with the dilemmas they present. If you teach a rather buoyant class you may want to pick a more serious piece in order to get them into a more reflective mood. If you have a quiet class, you may want to pick a more humorous piece that helps to bring the fun out in your students and raise the energy level in your class. Again, depending on the level of maturity of your students, you may decide to involve them in the decision-making process. You could, for example, give them photocopies of several plays to read and choose from, or you could read out the synopses of various plays and ask them for their preferences. Thinking about which play they themselves would love to do most and which would be best for the audience is valuable practice in thinking ahead. Seeing the play through the eyes of whoever the audience is going to be helps develop students' empathic skills.

Introduction

Physical Warm-Up Games

Warming up physically before a drama session or rehearsal not only prepares the body for the physical rigours ahead but also gets the blood pumping to the brain allowing better concentration and mental application. A set pattern of physical stretches that warms up each part of the body also allows messages between the brain and the body to travel more efficiently and can also ease students away from the world of jumbled thoughts they arrived with and into the world of the rehearsal room. The stretches you use can be the same as those for a sports warm-up but don't allow students to push themselves too much as it is a drama class we are preparing for and not a pole vault. It is advisable to keep these warm-up stretch routines exactly the same each time as the very repetition and familiarity allows students to find the right mental state in which to rehearse. Having said that, it is always fun to add a few physical games to vary the routine and keep the mood buoyant. Here are a few suggestions. Some require both physical and mental stamina.

Points of the Compass

Designate each side of the room as points on the compass, North, South, East and West. When you shout a point the students must run to it.

Variations:

- around the world – run clockwise around the room;
- end of the world – play dead.

Port and Starboard

The sides of room become parts of a ship, Port, Starboard, bow, stern. You call – pupils run.

Variations:

- man overboard – run to the sides;
- man the rigging – pretend to climb;
- scrub the deck – pretend to scrub;
- hit the deck – play dead.

Cat and Mouse

Every student has a partner and hold hands (or wrists) except two students who remain un-attached. Designate one as the cat and one as the mouse. The cat chases the mouse but the mouse, if they wish, can escape by holding the hand/wrist of someone who is already in a couple. The person in the couple whose hand isn't being held becomes

Introduction

the mouse so has to let go of his/her partner's hand and try to escape the cat. If the cat does catch the mouse they can swap roles.

Good Morning

Each student has to say 'Good morning' and shake the hands of all the other students while keeping the other hand shaking someone else's hand – only when both hands are occupied in handshaking can the student disengage and find someone else.

Blob

Students spread out in a defined area. One student is chosen as 'The Blob'. At the teacher's command 'The Blob' tries to tag (i.e. touch) the others. Once a person is tagged they attach themselves to 'The Blob' and become part of it. This continues until everyone is part of 'The Blob'. Encourage students to attach themselves in ways other than simply holding hands, the more 'Blob'-like the creature becomes, the more fun.

Once the game is over play it again but emphasise the teamwork and co-operation aspects and encourage your students to discuss tactics that will help when hunting as 'The Blob' or trying to avoid being assimilated by 'The Blob'. This will also move focus away from who was 'The Winner' and who was 'The Loser'.

Variation

The same as above but with everyone blindfolded. Stress the importance of moving slowly and stealthily and encourage your students to start relying on senses other than sight alone as they hunt or attempt avoidance. Once everyone is blindfold, touch your 'Blob' on the shoulder and then give the command for the game to start. As people feel themselves being tagged they silently join 'The Blob'.

Silent Terror or Snake in the Dark

Another slight variation on 'The Blob'. Spread your students out around the space and ask them to close their eyes. Then ask them to walk around the room with eyes shut. Select one student to be the snake or 'The Silent Terror'. They try to catch the others. If they are the snake they must hiss so that their prey can listen and try to avoid them. If they are the 'The Silent Terror', they make no sound at all but the others must whisper 'Silent Terror' whenever they touch someone else. If there is no reply then they have been caught by the Silent Terror. The person who is caught must join the back of the monster (hold onto waist of the last caught person). If the monster is the snake, victims must join the back when they have been hissed at!

Introduction

Handkerchief

Each player has a piece of material tucked in the top of the back of his or her trousers or skirt but with one piece clearly visible. The object of the game is for each player to collect as many of the other players' 'handkerchiefs' without having his or her own taken.

Keepie Uppie

The group has to keep a soft ball in the air for as many touches as possible. Each player is only allowed to touch it once in succession. If it touches the floor, or if any player takes more than one touch, the game must start again from number one. By using a balloon you make the game much easier but it means you can add further rules – such as using only feet and heads, left hand only, and so on.

Steer Me!

Each student takes a partner and they take it in turns to safely manoeuvre each other around the space but the student being steered is blindfold. They are not allowed to speak, and each pair should develop their own series of physical commands, for example tapping on the left shoulder to turn left. We recommend deciding on a 'stop' signal before all others! Students will be surprised at the level of trust they can develop in their partners as they are steered around a busy room. As confidence grows, increase the speed.

Oh! What a Tangled Web We Weave!

Students form a standing circle and hold hands. Split the group in the middle. One end begins to weave through the arms and legs of the rest of the group. Shout, 'Freeze!' – the two lines must untangle themselves without letting go of each other's hands and then reform the circle.

Zombie

This game works best if your students know each other's names at least reasonably well. They all stand in a well-spaced circle. Designate one to be 'Zombie'. That student puts their arms out in front of them and walks slowly, like a zombie, across the circle toward someone roughly opposite. The person being stalked needs to catch the eye of someone else in the circle who will then release them by calling their name (the name of the person being stalked, not their own!). The person who was being stalked by the zombie then becomes the zombie and sets off towards the person who released them whilst the original zombie takes their place in the circle. The person now being stalked has, in turn, to catch the eye of someone else in the circle to release them. This game

Introduction

is excellent for concentration as it only works efficiently when the students realize that the best method for success is to remain calm and focused and in tune with each other. Essential for drama! If the zombie catches the person before they are released, you can decide that they are 'out' or you can decide that the person who failed to release them in time is 'out' but until the pattern is established and the hysteria has subsided it's best to keep all involved.

Fruit Salad

Sit the students on chairs in a circle and give each student the name of a fruit making sure there are at least two of each fruit. When their fruit is called, they must change seats. The rules are:

- students cannot return to their original seat
- students cannot sit in seats to the immediate right and left of their own seat.

Variations

Choose categories other than fruit: animals, cities, famous people, insects, numbers.

Anyone Who ...

Arrange a circle of chairs but with one less chair than you have students. Everyone sits except one person who stands in the middle. That person then makes the statement 'Anyone who ...' and completes it with a category of their choice, 'has blonde hair ...', 'likes Hip-Hop ...'. Any students who feel that description fits them have to swap seats with each other whilst the original questioner tries to sit in a vacated chair. Whoever is left without a chair becomes the questioner.

The L-shaped Walk

Everyone finds a space and stands still. The only way to move around the room is in an L shape – 2 steps, a right-angled turn, then 3 steps or 3 steps, a right-angled turn and then 2 steps. Explain that the students must not touch anyone else and must pause if they are going to bump into others. Students move on the teacher's command.

Variations:

- alter pace (fast or slow), direction, mood, eyes shut.
- move to spot – choose a spot in the room, fix your eyes upon it, now move towards it without touching anyone on the way. (Vary pace, back/forward, eyes shut and so on.)

Introduction

Tips and guidelines for staging and performing a play

Voice projection

Basic message to get across to your students:

Remember: you're performing for the audience, and not for each other.

One of the most difficult ideas to get across to a student actor and even some adult actors is the absolute need for every member of the audience to hear what they are saying. No matter how brilliantly they are acting, if the audience can't hear them they disengage and become bored, restless and even angry. But voice projection isn't easy, particularly for teenagers whose voices are still in physical development, and whose self-confidence levels may not support the idea of expressing themselves loudly. However, we've all experienced the situation where before a rehearsal or lesson starts a group of kids can generate ear-splitting levels of noise, but after the start their voices seem to magically disappear when they're asked to contribute formally.

It can take years to train a voice properly, but the following tips will help maximise the vocal potential of your student actors in a rather shorter time.



1) Seeing is hearing

If the audience can see an actor's mouth then they can hear better. Sounds odd, but is perfectly true – so encourage your actors to keep their heads up, and even when two characters are talking directly to each other they should try and share the scene with the audience (see also 'Backs are bad' on the following page).



2) Throw your voice

Get your students to imagine they're throwing their voices up and over the audience so that it lands on the back row. This avoids a natural tendency for actors to perform only for the front two rows and ignore the rest of the audience, which in turn means they underestimate the volume required. A really good exercise to make this tangible for your students is to split the cast into two groups; whilst half of them stay in the performance space the other half stand where the back row of the audience will be, and then you get them to rehearse the play across that divide. They will soon become aware of the volume required to hear each other and therefore the volume required for the audience to hear them in performance.



3) A column of sound

The voice should come from the pit of the stomach, not the throat. This reduces the danger of straining the vocal chords and produces greater volume. To get your students to understand this, ask them to do a deep belly laugh – Ha, ha, ha, ha, ha! whilst placing their hand on their stomach, and then ask them to concentrate on the feeling of the stomach muscles. They will experience the sound in their throats as well, but encourage them to focus on getting more and more of the sound to start from the stomach. Stress the need for them to keep the throat relaxed and

Introduction

open. Then get them to say one line at a time, asking them to visualise the line starting in the pit of the stomach and then rising as a continuous column of sound up through the body, out of the mouth and right over to the back of the audience.

4) **Keep breathing!**

It may seem simplistic, but one of the most important rules of acting is 'keep breathing!'. Often, the tension involved in rehearsing and performing makes us forget this most basic of rules. Make sure your students take a deep enough breath to get them through the line so that the end of the line is as well supported as the beginning, and the volume won't tail off into inaudibility.



5) **Not the Opera House!**

Make absolutely sure you choose your performance space wisely. It's not going to work if you rehearse your play in a classroom and, encouraged by the results, book the nearest opera house for your performance. Be realistic about how large a space can be managed vocally by your students. It's vital for their confidence that they don't feel overawed by the challenge of filling too large a physical space.

Staging and 'blocking'

Basic message to get across to your students:

Remember the audience

Although this may seem an obvious point to make, it is worth asking your students on a regular basis, 'Where is the audience?' By doing this repeatedly, you will gradually allow the students to develop the actor's instinct of being constantly aware that they are performing not for each other but for an external entity, 'the Audience'. This may simply be classmates if the performance is to be in the classroom, or an actual audience of other classes, parents, friends and family if you have prepared a play to perform in a larger space – but the same rules apply.



1) **Backs are bad/Upstaging**

Unless you are creating a specific dramatic effect, an audience will not want to see the actors' backs, as this creates a barrier between the audience and the story. When you plan the characters' moves (this is what 'blocking' is), make sure that their faces are always seen, whether talking or reacting to what is happening, as that is far more engaging than the sight of someone's back.

However, sometimes you may deliberately use backs as an effect – when, for instance, you want the audience to focus on two characters in a crowd scene. In our play *Friendship* (pp 172–181) there is a party scene where we have prescribed that the audience should only see the faces of Lisa and Sheri, with the other characters at the party keeping their backs to the audience, who can then concentrate on the reactions of the two featured characters; but this example is the exception rather than the rule.

Introduction

Upstaging is a term used to describe what happens when an actor in a scene stands too far towards the back of the stage compared to the other actors. This forces them to turn their backs on the audience in order to speak to the 'upstaging' actor, and as mentioned above ... backs are not what an audience wants.



2) **NOT straight lines**

Even professional actors have a strange desire to stand in a straight line when a few of them find themselves on stage together, but it looks terribly boring from the audience's point of view. Unless your cast are going to dance the can-can, encourage them to stagger a straight line. However, be careful they don't 'upstage' each other.



3) **Back foot, front foot**

This is a difficult idea to describe but a simple idea to enact, so please watch the section on the DVD if you are not sure what we mean. Essentially what it entails is that if two actors or more are acting out a dialogue, then the actor whose turn it is to speak takes a small step backwards and shifts their weight onto their back foot. This turns their body towards the audience and slightly away from the other actor(s), helping the audience see their face when they're speaking. When the line is finished, the actor turns back again towards whoever has the next line, taking a small step forwards.



4) **Sight lines**

The lines of vision from the audience to the stage are called 'sight lines'. When you know where you are performing and you know where your audience will be seated, do the best you can to ensure that whoever sits in the seats at the ends of the rows can see **all** the actors on stage **all** of the time; if Jimmy's grandma is sitting at the end of a row A and she can't see Jimmy because other actors keep standing between her and her beloved grandson, then she won't be happy. To help with this problem, make sure that your first row of audience seating isn't too close to the stage. Also, don't let the characters on stage stand too close together, as this closes down what the audience can see; don't bunch your actors like bananas!

5) **Here I am! Here I go!**

When making entrances and exits, the actors shouldn't physically 'apologise' for arriving on stage or leaving it.

Introduction

What helps avoid this happening is the actor knowing exactly why their character is entering the scene or leaving it. So, early in the rehearsal schedule ask your actors 'Why is your character here, and what does he/she want?' and 'Why is your character leaving? Where are they going?' It may be that their character is timid and should indeed apologise physically for entering and exiting – but that then becomes a creative choice rather than an insecure actor's choice.

6) Levels

Choose your performance space so that even audience members in the back row can see as much as possible of all the actors; audience members who have to strain to see soon lose interest. If you are performing in a hall and it has no stage, try and build up the acting area with rostrums.

Introducing levels on the stage itself can not only help with sightlines but can also add interest visually; for instance, simply adding a chair to a scene allows one character to sit and one to stand – or even stand on the chair!

7) Movements and memory

The most common question asked of professional actors is 'How do you remember your lines?' Well, one of the reasons the lines gradually sink in is that the brain's physical memory comes into play, and with repeated rehearsal the brain starts to be able to associate certain lines with certain movements. This means that in terms of learning lines, the actors' movements – both their gestures and their actual movements around the stage – are very important.



8) What did I do last time?

But before the physical memory has firmly taken hold, it's highly advisable to get your actors to pencil their moves into their scripts next to the appropriate line. We say 'pencil' because you may decide to change a move as rehearsals develop. Elsewhere in this introduction (see 9) below) we refer to the advantages to be gained by having someone else – maybe a member of the class who is reluctant to perform but still wants to be involved – to keep an independent record of all the moves in a separate script. The main advantage of requiring all the moves to be written down is that it saves considerable time being wasted in rehearsal as the actors try to remember what they did last time.



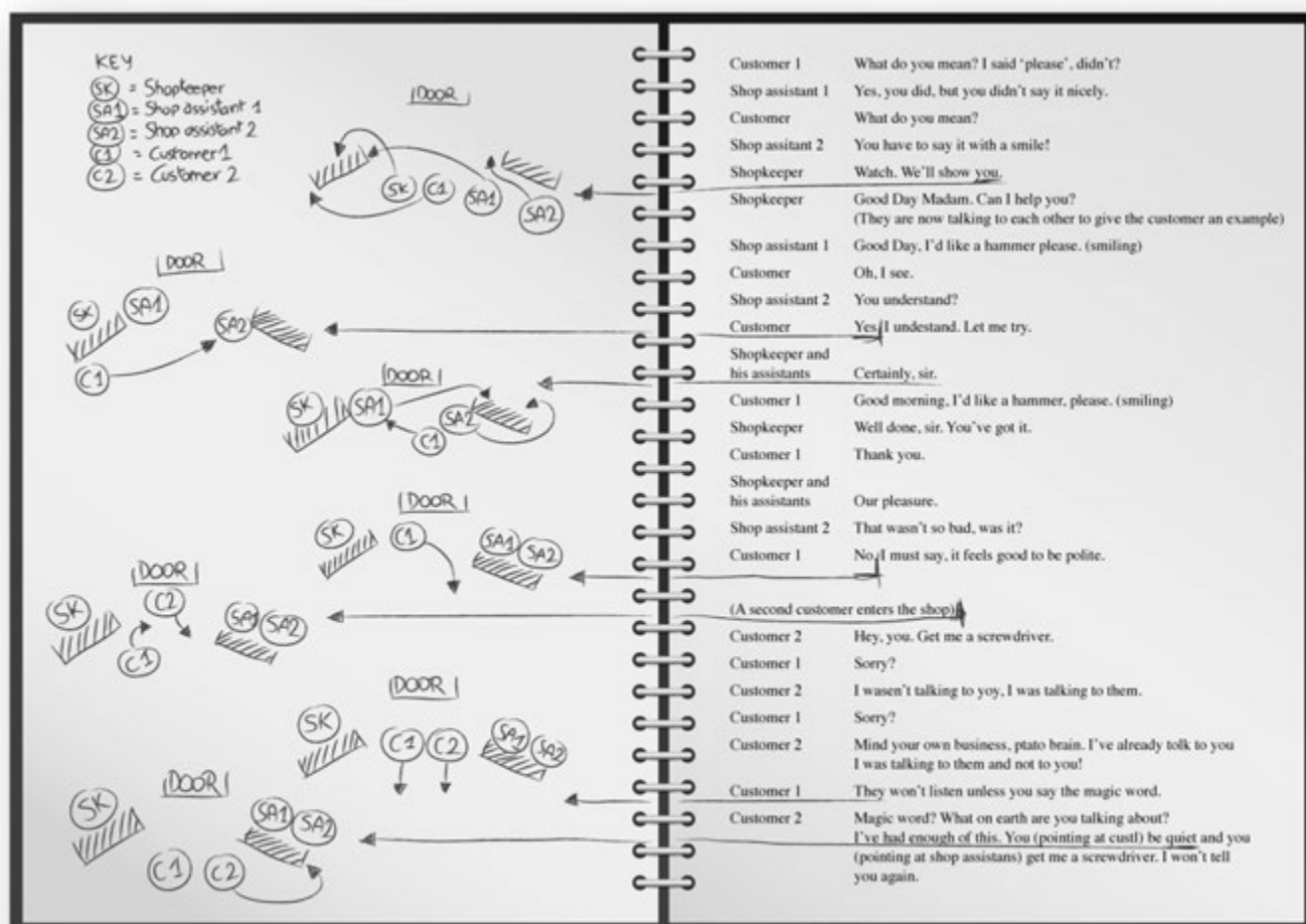
9) Blocking

The movements that the actors make around the stage during a play which have been devised during rehearsals are known collectively as the 'blocking' and another vital task the reluctant actors in your class can perform during rehearsals is to write the 'blocking' down so that you have a ready record from rehearsal to rehearsal of what was done previously – this saves a lot of time and argument! The easiest way to do this is by having a photocopied page of script in a ring-binder with a blank sheet of paper opposite and every move is written on the blank sheet of paper in the form of a diagram with a line drawn across to the particular word/phrase with which it is associated. For instance, if your setting had two chairs and a table and an

Introduction

actor moved from one chair to the other whilst saying ‘I need to be able to see out of the window’ you would draw a very simple bird’s eye view of the chairs and table with the actor’s initials in the chair from which they move and an arrow across to the other chair and then a line is drawn from that diagram across to the line in the script. This, again, keeps the student responsible fully involved with the text without having to perform.

The following diagram shows an example of how the actors' moves can be recorded in a ring binder. It's from the play *Being Polite* (p 56–61) which is also available on the DVD. As you can see, the notes contain abbreviations (SK = Shopkeeper, SA1 = Shop assistant 1, SA2 = Shop assistant 2, C1 = Customer 1 and C2 = Customer 2). The rectangles represent the two sales counters.



The actors movements are jotted down on the left.

The script sequences are on the right with the drawn pencil lines matching up.

Introduction

Concentration and focus

Basic message to get across to your students:

Support Each Other!

This section deals with one of the most important aspects of staging a play; 'focus' means the audience's attention being concentrated on where it needs to be at any given time. *VITAL!*

So here is a list of those aspects:



1) **Don't fiddle!**

Assuming that Sally is playing a character called Kate, you need to stress to your students that when Kate isn't speaking Sally mustn't fiddle with her hair, look out to see where Mum is sitting, yawn, keep scratching her head, have a giggle with another actor next to her – whatever! – as no matter how good the other actors are, the audience – guaranteed! – will become riveted by Sally's dandruff or intrigued by what's making her giggle, and not stay focused on the world of the play where Kate exists.



2) **Mirroring**

When any actor is on stage but not actively saying their lines, their job is to focus audience attention onto the person who is speaking. This means that should audience attention drift away from the main action, the supporting actors will immediately redirect it back again. The simplest way for you as a director to achieve this is to make sure every eye on stage is looking towards where you want the audience to look; the supporting actors are working as a mirror.

There may, however, be the odd exception – if, for instance, a character is meant to be bored by what is being said, then they will probably not want to focus on the action – but this will have been dictated by the demands of character or situation within the play.



3) **Listen, and be 'in the moment'**

No matter how many times the actors have rehearsed a play, the audience are seeing it for the first time, so it is important for the actors to be 'in the moment'. This means they shouldn't anticipate what is going to happen, even though they know because they've rehearsed it twenty times. The best way for the actors to do this is very simple: they should keep listening, particularly when they are performing in a language that is not their native tongue. By listening, they can avoid a situation such as this one: a sound cue is late and the actor isn't really listening, so he picks up the phone before it has even rung and says, 'David Walters here; who's that?' He has reacted to a sound that didn't happen in that performance, and he did this because it had always happened in rehearsals. Another reason for actors to be in the moment is that if actor A is listening when actor B forgets their lines, A might be able to help B out.

Introduction

If something does go wrong, there are usually two outcomes: either the audience don't notice, unless the actors make it obvious something has gone wrong by coming out of character or coming out of the world of the play – or the audience do notice. In which case the actors should do the opposite ...



4) **If it itches, scratch it!**

If Sally needs to sneeze, for example, then she can sneeze – but sneeze as Kate, staying in character. This means that if the audience are tempted to giggle they look at Sally but see Kate – still in character, still focused on the play – and they soon forget it ever happened. A straightforward sneeze is a lot less distracting than watching Sally spend 60 seconds or more trying desperately to stifle a sneeze. So whatever the actors need to do, they can do it – but they must stay in character.



5) **Enjoy it, relax ... nothing can go wrong!**

If something goes disastrously wrong and it's obvious the audience have noticed, then the actors should just relax and let the audience know that they too know it's gone wrong.

If the audience know something has gone wrong, they are going to be worried and even embarrassed for the actors – but if the actors let the audience know that they don't really mind, then the audience can relax and actually enjoy the moment with the actors. In a comedy, some of the finest moments can be when something goes wrong – provided the actors share it with the audience, who will suddenly feel really part of it. If an actor passes a cup to another actor and they drop it, the audience will worry – but the first actor turns to them and ad-libs, saying directly to them, 'I told him he needed glasses!' the audience will relax and laugh really loudly.



6) **Staying in character: acting is also reacting**

Make sure your actors stay in character throughout; one of the easiest ways of losing audience focus is when an actor, having said their line, goes back to being himself or herself whilst others speak. This is because when a line is spoken, the audience will be interested not only in what was said but also in how other characters on stage react to the line. To continue with Sally and her character Kate, if Kate angrily asks another character, 'What did you mean by that?', but Sally goes back to being herself whilst the other character explains, then the audience will become confused. Kate has to be onstage for the duration of the play, and Sally can only come back when the play has ended.

7) **Don't tread on a laugh**

A common trap fallen into by the inexperienced actor when performing comedy is 'treading on a laugh'. This phrase refers to the situation where the audience laugh at a line or situation in a play but the actor with the next line proceeds to deliver that line whilst the audience is still laughing and as a consequence the line gets lost. This line might be a vital piece of plot information or a line designed to get yet another laugh but will fail to have the designed effect if it is lost in uproarious audience mirth! If the audience do laugh then tell your actors to stay in character

Introduction

and enjoy the laugh but simply wait until the laugh has subsided enough for the next line to be heard. The fact that the audience will know you are waiting for them will greatly empower them and allow them to feel really part of the experience. Prepare your actors to be ready for laughs BUT not to take them for granted. There's nothing worse than an actor waiting for an anticipated laugh that fails to arrive. The other side to that coin is that in every comedy you will find lines that you consider mundane to be inexplicably hilarious to your audience.

Interestingly, performing comedy for an audience in a language other than their native tongue creates one unique situation and that is the 'double-laugh'. The 'double-laugh' is what happens when part of the audience whose comprehension is high laugh immediately but then have to take a moment to explain the joke to others in the audience whose comprehension is less advanced who then laugh themselves. Knowing when to wait for the 'double-laugh' cannot be taught but comes only with experience; however if the concept is explained it can help!

Building the characters to tell your story

.....
Basic message to get across to your students:

Do it physically!
.....

Although the primary purpose of *Get on Stage!* is to allow the English language to be practised and used by students in a hopefully engaging way, the overall enjoyment of the experience is greatly enhanced by allowing them to experiment physically with the characters. Physicality can really help to tell a story. When a character shuffles onto the stage, bent over and using a walking stick, then even before they've said a word the audience know they are old, so that they can immediately focus on what the character is going to say. Also, by a character having obvious physical attributes, the less secure students can hide behind these and feel free to experiment, as it's not them but the character who is doing everything.



1) **Gesture**

Sometimes (particularly, though not exclusively, for comedy purposes), an actor may put in an exaggerated gesture for emphasis. This can not only help the comedy, but also associating a gesture with a word can help as a memory aid for the actor – remember the point made earlier about the brain's 'physical memory'? In the play *Being Polite* on the DVD, there is a demonstration of gestures being used for comic effect when the characters say 'magic word' and 'please'.



2) **How does my character stand and walk?**

Once you have decided on a play, ask your students to stand and walk in the way they think the various characters should stand and walk: a handsome prince, an old woman, a policeman ...

Introduction



3) Who does my character remind me of?

Sometimes it helps to ask your students to think of someone they know, either from their own lives or fictional characters who remind them, if only a bit, of the character they are going to play. That gives the inexperienced actors a useful starting point, for both voice and movements.



4) Hands

Believe it or not, one of the hardest things about acting is to know what to do with your hands. What you don't want is a stage full of actors with their hands thrust deep into pockets because they don't know what to do with them. Another trap is that actors can overuse their hands by emphasising every word with a gesture. So tell the students that if in doubt they can let their hands hang by their sides; it's fine.

However, hands can be used to great effect if used properly. Suggest some emotional and physical states and ask your actors to come up with suitable hand actions such as these:

- exasperated – hands on head pulling own hair
- thinking – one arm folded across the chest, the other stroking the chin
- angry – arms held rigidly at the sides of the body, hands making tight fists
- cold – the character blows on their hands
- hot – the character fans their face with their hand.

And if one character fans their face but the other characters don't, the audience will know that that character has been running or exerting themselves.

All these physical signals help an audience prepare for the language, so that even if they don't understand every word they can get the general idea.



5) There's no such thing as a small part

Encourage your students to approach playing the smaller parts with as much care as the bigger parts. In Shakespeare's *Macbeth*, there is a character, Seyton, who only has two lines but if he doesn't come on and tell Macbeth that his wife is dead, then the rest of the play can't happen at all. And if the actor playing Seyton doesn't project the right sense of fear for what he is about to say, but instead, casually and chewing gum, mentions the fact that the queen is dead, then the whole play is ruined. *There is no such thing as a small part.* For example, in some of the plays in *Get on Stage!* there are characters described simply as customers – but if each customer is thought about and turned into an individual, then the play becomes much more satisfying overall for both cast and audience.

So, ask the students to find a word they think describes some aspect of their character, then ask them to look that word up in a thesaurus – and they will discover all sorts of subtle differences in the way they can act out the original word.

Introduction



Pace

Basic message to get across to your students:

Slow, slow – quick, quick, slow

‘Pace’ is a word that is often misinterpreted by actors as meaning ‘fast’ – but in fact, just as in sport, pace describes the speed at which a scene or play should be played, be it fast, slow, steady, frantic etc. By varying the pace of a scene an entirely different effect can be achieved. There have been occasions when we have been struggling to define what exactly is wrong with a particular scene, and then we have discovered that just by either speeding up the pace or slowing it down all the problems disappear and the scene comes into focus. Within a play there may, depending on the narrative, be many differently paced scenes.

Here are some ways in which the appropriate pace can be achieved:



1) Picking up cues

This phrase means ‘don’t leave unjustified pauses between the lines’. In our short play *Smart Shoppers* (pp 40–42) there is a section of dialogue as follows:

Woman (*twirling around*) Well? How do I look in my new dress?

Man You look marvellous, darling. Happy anniversary.

Woman You’re sure it doesn’t make my bottom look a bit fat?

Man Not at all. But ...

Woman (*alarmed*) What? What’s the matter? I look awful, don’t I?

Man Calm down, darling – there’s nothing wrong! It’s just that you look so lovely in that dress I want to get you something else to match.

Taking a real-life situation, if after a woman has said ‘I look awful, don’t I?’ a man were to pause before responding, then the woman would probably carry on talking, asking him further questions and getting more desperate – but those lines aren’t in the script, so it’s essential for the actor playing Man to pick up his cue and respond immediately with his ‘Calm down, darling’.

In addition, Man, by picking up his cue promptly, can then relax and slow down his pace throughout the rest of his speech, just as he would if he really were trying to calm her down.

Important! Picking up a cue doesn’t mean the actor can gabble their next line; it just means that unwarranted gaps in the dialogue are avoided, and so the play feels fast and interesting, but remains completely understandable.



2) Don’t let your character pick up another character’s pace

Referring to the above extract again, Man must be careful not to pick up the pace of Woman’s ‘I look awful’. Her speech is to be made in an alarmed and even hasty manner – but Man must in contrast speak slowly, calmly and reassuringly. It may

Introduction

seem a rather obvious point to make, but when adrenalin is involved it is easy for every actor to unwittingly follow the pace of the previous speech, be it fast or slow, and this leads to one-dimensional performances that are either way too fast or way too slow.



3) **Don't rush through the 'boring bits'/Remember the audience have never heard it before**

Another trap is the actors forgetting that although they may have rehearsed and rehearsed and rehearsed a play, an audience is seeing it for the first time. So in the final rehearsals, don't let them rush through bits they know really well or think might have got a bit boring. It's true that some parts of a play may come together really quickly, and the actors may get a bit bored and want to get onto the bit they really enjoy – but as often as not the audience really need to hear and understand the 'boring' bit in order to make sense of the 'exciting' bit.



4) **Emphasis and repetition**

Sometimes a line in a playscript will be repeated, and varying the pace and emphasis of the repeats allows you to create completely different effects. For instance, imagine a character has to repeat three times the line, 'He said I'm a monkey face!'

- If the character says it the first time quietly and slowly, and gets louder and faster on each repeat, this can indicate that he/she may have started shocked or quietly seething, and ended up in a towering rage, implying the unwritten line 'And I'm going to *get him!*'
 - However, if the character says it the first time loudly, quickly and angrily, and gradually gets quieter and slower, then they may have gradually got more upset and sad, implying the unwritten line 'And I'm really hurt.'
- So, varying the pace is a useful tool for creating dramatic interest. Play with it!

Set, props, lights, music and sound effects

Basic message to get across to your students:

Do It Yourself!

Each individual play in this book gives you guidance, but here are a few general points.

1) **Set**

The plays in *Get on Stage!* do not rely on elaborate sets. They can all be made with tables and chairs and other easily obtainable objects. Part of the fun is finding simple ways to create a set; if in doubt, paint it and stick it up! Remember, a desk is a desk until you add a paper tablecloth and a paper rose ... when it becomes part of a posh restaurant. Or a table put up on a small platform with a paper sign saying 'Fast Food' and two painted wheels stuck on the audience side of the platform

Introduction



becomes a fast-food van – your audience’s imagination will do the rest. The DVD version of *Rusty Nail Soup* (p 127) demonstrates how to create an environment using the actors themselves as doors and cupboards.

This doesn’t mean you shouldn’t be as creative as you wish and build whatever you want – but equally, if you haven’t got the resources or time to build anything at all, then just get a student to read out the set descriptions and stage directions, and allow the audience to create the world for themselves. That in itself will create a special magic.

If you do build anything, then make sure that it is safe and ‘excited-kid-proof’. Clip the tablecloth to the desk and blu-tack the vase to the cloth, so that if your young actors, in their excitement, leap up from the restaurant table they don’t take everything with them. Because despite earlier messages saying nothing can go wrong, there’s no point in going looking for trouble; performing a play is quite nerve-racking enough for your actors without them wondering if a piece of wobbly scenery is about to crash down on their heads!

2) Props

The same rules apply as above; simple and safe. If an actor comes on stage with a broom handle and tells the audience it’s a laser gun, they’ll believe it.

3) Lights

If you can get hold of some simple lighting then that’s great because it can help define the performance area and create a sense of occasion. But no way are they essential – Shakespeare only had a few candles and he managed. Dimming the lights between scenes is a simple and effective way of denoting the passing of time or a change in location, particularly if accompanied by music (see below). If you do decide to use lighting take time to focus the lighting on the areas of the stage where the action will occur. Sounds obvious but the audience’s eyes will be drawn to the brightest spots on the stage so if you have a chair onstage and a character sits on that chair make sure the light hits the chair and mark the floor of the stage with tape so you know where the chair is meant to be every time you perform.

A light focused on the wrong spot can be terribly distracting as the audience start to think ‘I wonder what’s going to happen in that bright patch of light?’ rather than concentrating on the play as it unfolds.

4) Music

Music, with or without lighting, is an incredibly useful method of setting or changing the emotional texture of a scene. You will struggle to watch a film or TV show where music is *not* used as an amazingly effective shortcut to tell the audience what they should be feeling. If your class is blessed with students who can play an instrument, then so much the better! A simple tune played on the recorder can be used to suggest a variety of different moods. A Scottish lament can invoke terrible sadness and yearning whereas a jaunty Scottish reel cannot fail to bring a smile. Any of the short comedy sketches in *Get on Stage!* would benefit greatly by

Introduction

having kazoos played before and after each scene. (Kazoos are brilliant for comedy as they require no instrumental ability whatsoever and are inherently 'silly'.) Music can allow an audience to know where they are before a word has been spoken, so that they can immediately attune to the dialogue. Even without the luxury of live music, existing music/songs played on CD are just fine and allow students to really think about a play and suggest which of their favourite songs/tunes might fit.

5) Sound effects

The Internet is full of sites where you can download simple sound effects to help create an atmosphere or mark a particular moment, and most cheap keyboards contain a bewildering variety of bleeps and bongs that can be easily utilised for a show. But it's far better, in our opinion, if the students create their own sound effects with their own voices. *Rusty Nail Soup* (p 127) on the DVD uses the actors to create a creaky door and a slamming one, both physically and vocally, which is more satisfying in a theatrical sense. Also, some of the playscripts in *Get on Stage!* contain specific suggestions for vocal sound effects, but we're sure you will be able to find opportunities that we've missed!

Changing scenes

Basic message to get across to your students:

Make sure your audience knows what you know!

In a big theatre scene changes are easily marked by a number of things, for example curtains falling and rising, a change in the lights (e.g. from day to night time), or a different setting specified through different props. None of these may be available for your performance. However, possible changes in time and location have to be made clear to the audience in order for them to be able to follow the play.

A number of the plays in this book have been written in such a way that the scene change follows naturally from what is said by the actors or the narrator(s).

In *The Children and the Wind*, for example, there is a chicken who acts as a narrator. Whenever a scene change happens, the chicken announces that as part of her narration. When at the end of the first scene, for example, Mum wants to make some pancakes for the children, but she doesn't have any flour, and the children decide to go to the miller to get some, the chicken says:

CHICKEN And off they went to the miller, where they filled their bowl with flour. They were very happy, but as they walked back, dreaming of pancakes, something happened.

This makes it clear to the audience that the next scene is set outside the flour mill and it might not be necessary to further indicate that there has been a change of scene.

Introduction

If you want to be on the safe side, however, it might be advantageous to indicate the change of scene also visually, for example by getting a student to walk across the stage holding a board with the new scene written on, clearly visible to everyone in the audience.

An alternative way of communicating changes of scene visually to the audience would be for a pair of students to carry in a flip chart where the different stage settings have been written beforehand, one page per scene. The students enter, put down the flipchart, turn the page so the audience can see the specifications for the next scene, and point at it, pausing a bit to give the audience time to read what's on the flip chart.

As we have stressed, visual announcements give clear indications to the audience and should therefore be used routinely when you get your students to perform a play. The other advantage of using them lies in the fact that you can involve more students in the performance.



Remembering or learning lines

.....
Basic message to get across to your students:

Moving Makes Memories!
.....

‘How do you remember your lines?’ This is the *wrong* question to ask your students!

‘How do you *learn* your lines?’ is more to the point.

A line will stubbornly refuse to be remembered until it has been properly learnt. So, what does ‘properly learnt’ mean? There are three parts to it, and they apply to all of us:

- Intellectual Memory
This is the part of the line-learning process when our brain reads the script and makes sense of each line, constructing a **logical progression** to help us remember it.
- Physical Memory
Again, develops during rehearsals as the brain starts to associate **physical action** – sitting, standing, walking, handing over something, shaking our finger at someone – with each line.
- Emotional Memory
Develops during rehearsals when the brain starts to remember **how we felt** when we spoke that line.

All three are equally important, but as we get older we rely more and more on emotional and physical memory, as the talent we innately have as young children to read something a couple of times and simply remember it starts to fade.

Introduction

Line learning depends crucially on understanding what each line means. That may sound obvious, but we have witnessed actors run through an entire part from memory yet still stumble over the same line over and over again – and the reason is always that they still don't really know *why* they're saying it!

So, here's a learning system we've found works well on the whole:

1) **Read**

To begin with, the cast should read the play a number of times out loud to each other, so they start to understand it as a whole. Reading out loud is an entirely different exercise from reading quietly to oneself – it's a far more valuable one for this purpose, as it allows the brain to immediately start remembering how it physically feels to form and speak those particular words in that particular order and to make associations with the 'feel' of each line.

2) **Block**

Then start to 'block' the play (i.e. direct the students' moves around the stage) so that their brains can associate their movements, gestures and other physical actions with the lines. Write the moves down in your script as an *aide-memoire*.

3) **Discuss**

Discuss with the students what each line means and how their character feels when they say the line, so that each line has real thought behind it. This applies as much to silly comedy as to more serious material.

4) **Record**

It's really useful to sound-record the play as soon as possible – you can do this with the actors reading their parts aloud – and then give each actor a copy of the recording so that they can speak along with it when they're away from rehearsals. Whenever they get an odd free moment they can turn on their mp3 player and practise; even just listening like this helps enormously, especially if the listener follows the lines in the script, as this starts them associating the sound of the lines with a 'picture' of them. It's amazing how quickly actors can tell you whereabouts on the page a line is, even if they can't quite remember the line itself with total accuracy.

Listening to the recording as they go to sleep, too, is really helpful, as the brain has the ability to carry on working whilst one is asleep.

Recording also allows each actor to get used to their fellow actors' voices.

Sometimes an actor might like to record themselves doing all the parts except their own, leaving gaps where their character speaks.

5) **Repeat after me ...**

The scariest moment in rehearsals is when an actor has to put the script down and start remembering their lines rather than read them. So the earlier you get your students to face this the better, and you can do this by having someone 'feed' each actor their lines. Sometimes in rehearsals we won't let the actors have the scripts in their hands at all, but we feed them the lines and they repeat what they've heard.

Introduction

They can still use their recording and script when they practise on their own – but our method means that from the earliest possible point in time the actors can listen and react to each other, and won't ever have to face the dreadful moment when their accustomed safety blanket, the script, is taken away!

6) Write

A really simple exercise to test the memory is for the actor to write down their lines as they remember them, and then compare them with the script. This enables them to gauge where they need to concentrate their efforts.

7) Relax

Often an actor *will* know their lines but will *think* that they don't. It's part of the director's job to get them to relax and so allow their brain to access their memory stores without panic getting in the way.



And finally ...

Basic message to get across to your students:

Have Fun!

1) There's no such thing as a Bad Actor

Putting on a show only works as an entirely co-operative and mutually supportive venture. Some people are naturally more gifted actors than others, but if we assume that everyone is doing their best and will only get better with support and worse with criticism, then we won't go far wrong. *The experience must be fun so whilst we should encourage our young actors to be brave and fulfil their potential let's not ask for too much and spoil the fun.*

2) There's no such thing as a Bad Idea

The team effort required to stage a play is best achieved when everyone encourages each other to express themselves and their ideas. What may appear as a bad idea at first may trigger a train of thought and discussion that leads to a good idea. Even an idea that appears bad is better than no idea.

That said, you will need to introduce some form of discipline to control your free-for-all ideas sessions, so that those with the loudest voices and biggest personalities don't swamp those who are more reticent – but teachers know more about achieving that than most people do.

3) Enjoy it. Relax. Nothing can go wrong!

It's worth finishing off by repeating this core maxim:

If your students are enjoying it, the audience will enjoy it.

If your students are relaxed but excited, the audience will be relaxed but excited.

Nothing can go wrong ... even if it does!

Break a leg!!

Chapter 1

Short sketches

1

The Perfect Son



Track 01

A sketch in 1 scene

Roles 2–5 (the latter if the ‘Person 2’ role is shared between 2, 3 or even 4 actors)

Runtime 2 minutes, depending on production

Set A park bench

Props 2 chairs or a bench
optional: trees, bushes etc. – either represented by students, or made of cardboard, paper, wool

Style A short, simple comedy sketch

Synopsis A man brags to his friend he has the perfect son. The friend can’t believe what he’s hearing!

Language level Elementary – A2

Language areas Present simple (3rd person singular affirmative, negative and questions); verb phrases (*do homework, tell a lie, come home late* etc.)

Stage tips This is a very simple sketch that doesn’t require a lot of props. The scene can be set by using a few pictures of trees and bushes drawn on poster paper, and two chairs can be used as the park bench where the two people are sitting. Alternatively, you can encourage students to create trees and bushes made from cardboard, paper, wool etc. or even act them out on stage (it could simply be children holding word cards ‘bush’, ‘tree’ etc.)

Variations

- 1) Students add their own ideas to the script, e.g. by using adverbs of frequency (*Does he **always** do what you tell him? Does he **sometimes** break things?*).
- 2) Students change the script to fit a different theme, e.g. The perfect teacher/ the perfect friend/ the perfect mum (dad). Encourage them to think of alternative ideas for endings that would work for those ideas (e.g. the perfect teacher is a puppet/ teddy bear – hence never gives homework, never gets angry, never tells students to work harder etc.).
- 3) If you decide to share the role of ‘Person 2’ among several actors, then the students could decide to set the play somewhere else. Four people playing golf, for instance, would provide interesting and possibly amusing options physically. Whilst one character speaks, another attempts a lusty ‘drive’ or a tricky ‘putt’ with varying degrees of success.



The Perfect Son

Roles **Person 1**
 Person 2

Scene **Two people sitting on a park bench**

PERSON 1 I have the perfect son.

PERSON 2 The perfect son? Nobody's perfect!

PERSON 1 My son is.

PERSON 2 Really? Does he never tell a lie?

PERSON 1 No, he doesn't.

PERSON 2 Does he never forget to do his homework?

PERSON 1 No, he doesn't. Never!

PERSON 2 Does he never use bad language?

PERSON 1 No, he doesn't.

PERSON 2 Does he never get bad marks at school?

PERSON 1 No, he doesn't.

PERSON 2 Does he never come home late?

PERSON 1 No, he doesn't.

PERSON 2 Is it true?

PERSON 1 Is what true?

PERSON 2 About your son. He doesn't tell lies, he never forgets to do his homework, he doesn't use bad language, he doesn't get bad marks at school. And he doesn't come home late. Is that all true?

PERSON 1 It is, believe me.

PERSON 2 Then you're right.

PERSON 1 Right? With what?

PERSON 2 He's the perfect son.

PERSON 1 I told you. He's the perfect son.

PERSON 2 You have the perfect son.

PERSON 1 Yeah, that's right.

PERSON 2 The perfect, perfect son.

PERSON 1 The perfect, perfect son!

PERSON 2 Fantastic! What's his name?

PERSON 1 Whose name?

PERSON 2 Your son's.

PERSON 1 Oh, my son's. Jonathan.

PERSON 2 He's great!



PERSON 1 Who's great?

PERSON 2 Your son.

PERSON 1 My son? Why's he so great?

PERSON 2 He doesn't tell lies, he never forgets to do his homework, he doesn't use bad language, he doesn't get bad marks at school. And he doesn't come home late.

PERSON 1 That's right.

PERSON 2 How old is he?

PERSON 1 How old's who?

PERSON 2 Your son.

PERSON 1 Oh, my son. He's eight.

PERSON 2 He's EIGHT?

PERSON 1 Yes – eight months!

