

## THE FIRST CLASS

- a practical workshop

*Annie Ryan*

Byrne and Joyce Piven have been devising and teaching acting through improvisation games for the last 25 years at their workshop in Chicago. Although their work has taken them in many different directions, the first class they teach a group, whether they be nine-year-olds or professional actors, has hardly changed in the 15 or so years that I've known them. In it are very nearly all the main principles for good practice and play, and it can be applied to improvisation, devising, ensemble work and plays to 'liberate the life of the scene'. This is the first class.

### *THE WARM UP*

*- A physical group game that gets them going and establishes the ensemble.*

#### **1. The Yes Game**

- The group stands in a circle. Player A points to another player in the circle, Player B, across the space (you can use names - a good one to get to know names). A's **objective** is to move into B's space.
- B says "YES" (it is the Yes Game, after all, and the first rule of improvisation - **agreement**)
- A moves across the circle to B's place as B points to another player, C, to vacate her place for A. B must not move until C gives permission. And so on.

That's the game. Pretty simple and meaningless (like most of the games). It usually takes a little while for the group to find the rhythm of the game. Here's the point: it establishes a **pattern** which can work if the players are **focused, committed and clear** - strong gestures, a ready stance and a full "Yes" should be encouraged.

More advanced players can be given calls that the whole group take on, like: Movement calls - slow motion, double time

Vocal calls - whisper, 'train overhead'

State calls - happiness, sadness, fear and anger

Really connected groups can transform on their own without your calls. If one player transforms the state, the whole group transforms with them.

## 2. Space Walk

This is more of an **awareness** exercise than a game, where the whole group walks around the space. Nice, free, easy walk - no holding on to bits of themselves and no stone-faced 'I am a serious actor' walk - just a light and simple walk.

Through a series of 'freeze'/'move' calls, talk them through various spaces in degrees: from the space within them, to the space around their bodies as they move, the actual room itself (how many windows, texture of the walls), the players (different rhythms, walks, people leading the space with different parts of the body), and the space itself - the empty space, the actor's material to transform!

As they're moving around the space, **in agreement**, let the space get heavier - let it get so heavy that it slows them down to a standstill. No initiating! Let it happen organically. Encourage them to see where they are in relation to the group: what is the story in the picture they're making? Then let it lighten up again. You can call qualities - like bubbly effervescence or fiery sparks... Freeze them. Right from there, start a Machine.

### *THE MAIN GAMES*

*- This is intensive and disciplined work, ranging from quite abstract movement games like these below to full scene improvisations. These games below make great warm-up games for advanced groups. They are the heart of the work.*

## 3. Machine

Machine is one of those old cheese-ball games from the seventies. There is nothing more painful than a dead machine. Unless the players commit fully and work together, they will look and feel ridiculous. The machine will be as strong as the energy it's given.

- One player starts a strong, **full body movement** with a sound.

The movement should be clear and clean enough to repeat and use the whole body from a solid stance. It should also move the space - push or pull it - as opposed to waving the arms around. Encourage them to use their **full voices** to fill the space - sounds like 'shhh' are too safe. Take the risk!

- The other players feed into the machine one at a time with different movements and sounds until the whole group is going.
- Together, with **no-one initiating**, the machine slows down until they freeze.
- Then, by listening and following their breath, it slowly starts up again and accelerates until it's going so fast that the group, magically, freezes together - the proof of **ensemble connection**.

You may need to call the group through the game the first few times, but after a while, they will freeze on their own.

You can give the participants theme calls like The Jealousy Machine, Love, War, Summertime, etc.

#### **4. Give and Take**

- The group balances out the space and finds stillness in different positions throughout the room.
- One player, A, begins to move (they 'take' the space) in any way they want with sound.
- A **Give** is when A passes their energy to another player, B, in a clear enough and strong enough way that B takes the space. B can move the same way or transform, the important thing is that we see the connection, the energy passing from one to the other. (There is no physical contact in this game.)
- A **Take** is when A is moving with sound and B gets the moves on impulse without being given to in a clear and strong enough way to suspend or freeze A. A can take right back if she wants to or C might take. It's like an entrance in a scene, or an interruption.

The game really takes off when **the players' impulses are responses to what's already happening in the space**. Like in all improvisation and acting, a player's impulse for action will amaze themselves - and us! - if they **allow themselves to discover it organically**, as opposed to doing something they thought of before, especially something that they think will amuse us.

Good calls for Give and Take are atmospheric, for example cold, heat, rubbery, prickly, forest at dawn, rush hour O'Connell Street... (always call when a player is moving and have them transform their movement according to **the sound, feeling, shape of the word**, NOT the literal meaning).

### *THE PAY OFF*

- *A little lighter fun and usually puts to work the principles of the class in scene.*

#### **5. Three Chair Conversation**

- Set up three chairs next to each other. One player sits in each.
- The first chair comes up with a character based on an occupation.
- The third chair speaks in their own voice.
- The second chair's job is to maintain the integrity of the conversations of the both players on either side at the same time.
- This is a relay game, where you call 'change' and the players shift chairs, taking on their new role.
- After everyone has gone up, change the game to **Conflicting Objectives**.
- Give the players a Who - What - Where. For example, the middle chair is the parent of the players in the two other chairs. They're in a restaurant. The kids are trying to get the parent to let them have more freedom.
- Let them establish the Where. Give focus to the table, the food. Make sure they're really chewing instead of indicating eating. No charades!
- It's a good idea to play Hook-up during this to allow everyone up and introduce the calls. Freeze the group, and a new player takes the exact position of somebody in the scene, and continues the scene. No backtracking!
- As they play the scene, you can call:
  - slow motion/double time
  - whisper/train overhead
  - Give and Take
  - contact (player must make contact with another with every new thought)
  - gibberish/English (switch back and forth - players must keep continuity and integrity of language)

- echo (player begins sentence with the last word or phrase spoken)
- inner monologue (group freezes for one player speaks their thoughts for us.)
- theatre styles: melodrama, opera, realism, etc.

There are hundreds of variations on these games to invent. Keep the standards high and have fun!

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