

THE SECOND CLASS

- a workshop in ensemble physical theatre

Annie Ryan

A workshop entitled 'The FIRST CLASS' by Annie Ryan is also downloadable in this section of the web site.

This class is the second of a series of workshops that were created by Byrne and Joyce Piven and their staff of the Piven Theatre Workshop in Chicago, whose work sprang from Viola Spolin's theatre games system. To say this is the second class is actually giving the wrong idea. It is a series of games and ensemble exercises that you might come across in the early weeks of a class at the Workshop. The structure of the Pivens' classes has been developing and transforming over the last twenty-five years or so, and although the same old games have been repeated over and over, their contexts and interpretation of their value have changed. It is most accurate to say that I am giving you the second in a series of classes on theatre games and improvisation to demonstrate how they do things in Chicago. I hope you will take them and make them your own.

- The Warm up | The Main Games | The Pay-off

THE WARM UP

Space Walk

This is the same warm-up from the first class. As with all of these games, they cannot be repeated often enough. After all, they exercise what is at the essence of what an actor does. Playing them again and again will only give its players a deeper sense of what the fabric of acting is and strengthen the ensemble.

Ask the players to walk around the space. Make sure they are not going in circles, but switching directions in the space. Get them to become aware of how they are moving through the space. Are they leading the space with one part of the body more than another? Ask them to stand still for a moment and to take the time to balance on their two feet. Does one foot feel bigger than the

other or are the toes of one foot more spread and relaxed than the other?

Ask them to walk again and to imagine their skeleton moving through the space. Ask them to become aware of all the space between their joints: their toes, ankles, knees, pelvis - what are all the directions the pelvis moves in: back and forth, up and down. *(Obviously for more immature groups, mentioning anything about the pelvis could dissolve their concentration into fits of giggles - use your discretion to decide how deeply they can handle exploration of their bodies)* - spine, ribcage, shoulders, neck, head. You can ask them to try to move without moving the pelvis or the shoulders or the arms and notice how their walks change, and how much freer they walk when they release that tension. *(Note: this warm-up is very useful for character work by focusing on different body parts, transforming the walk, suggesting different traits.)*

Call 'freeze' - total suspension of movement. Not a muscle moves. Ask them to notice all the movement that is still happening within them: blood coursing through veins, breath, the odd muscle twitching.

'Move' - now ask them to become aware of the room itself: the windows, whatever detail there may be on the floor, on the ceiling, on the walls; colours rushing past, all the blue in the room, etc.

'Freeze' - wherever their eyes have landed on, let that be the focal point to a picture. What is in the centre? What is in the periphery?

Have them close their eyes - see that picture in their mind's eye, the exact colours and shadows, everything. Ask them to open their eyes to see what they've missed the first time.

'Move' - now notice the other players: different walks, expression, etc. Encourage them to look at each other. Avoid that stony-faced Actor Walk, instead, let it be light and relaxed.

Call 'freeze' a few times. Make sure they are freezing and moving together; that they are in 'the same space'.

Now get them to focus on the space itself - that nothingness that is our raw material for transformation. Let them know that as a group,

they can go anywhere - a snowy mountain-top, a boggy field, a crammed city subway car - anywhere, so long as they all agree to be there. An audience is happy to suspend disbelief until somebody or something breaks the illusion.

Let the space get heavier and heavier, until the players must slow down together, pushing the space with different parts of their bodies - the elbow, the head, shoulders, knees. They can even reach out and help each other through the space. Let it become so heavy that it suspends them into a freeze.

Little by little, let their breath lighten the pace, allowing them gradually, as a group, to move more freely. It is very important that no one player is initiating these changes. It should be triggered by your call, and allowed to transform organically within the group. Let the space become so light that they are whipping around the space, like snowflakes swirled around by the momentum of the movement.

Ask them to keep this energy, but focus it only in the very centre of the room, so they are moving in and out of the centre, exploring high space, low space, in very close proximity with each other. Call 'freeze', and this takes us into the next game.

Positive / Negative Space

When the group is frozen, tap half of them on the shoulder and ask them to step out of the picture. Carefully, so that they don't upset the positions of the player left in the centre. Ask the group outside (Group A) to walk around the players in the centre (Group B); study their three dimensional shape as a group. Notice how the different shapes in relation to each other create elements of story in their imagination. What could be happening here? An evacuation? A party?

Ask Group A to fill in the 'negative space' in the picture with new shapes, as if it is the next paragraph of a story, or the next shot in a film. Ask them to do this carefully and silently, feeding into the focal point of the picture.

When Group B feels that Group A are frozen in position, they can very carefully move out to the periphery of the room to observe the new picture.

They simply alternate now, each group observing and then entering into the centre. Encourage them to move as a group, that each group freeze together and release the freeze together to keep the integrity of the two groups. Encourage them to deepen and intensify what is already in the space, feeding into that story, rather than creating something new. You may have to call them in and out at first, but an experienced ensemble should be able to play this game without any side coaching from you.

This game may be transformed into either of the three games below:

THE MAIN GAMES

1-2-DE CROUX

This game was apparently invented by the famous French mime artist, Etienne De Croux and turned up somehow in Chicago. I've always thought it was a rather silly name, so please change it if you want. It is basically Give and Take with contact and no sound.

One player moves at a time towards contact with another player.

When played from scratch, i.e. when the group isn't already in a big clump in the middle of the floor, as in above, it can be started like this:

Six or so players stand in a large semi-circle facing the front (as opposed to each other). Let them stand in 'neutral', that is, feet about shoulder width apart, unlock the knees, tall spine, head balanced, eyes forward.

Number each player one through six. When you call a number, the corresponding player moves in slow motion toward the centre of the space, paying special attention to the architecture of their body in space. Call different numbers, interrupting the moving player, until all players are in the centre of the space and in contact with each other. Call the players into motion until you feel they are able to give and take on their own.

The players move in slow-motion toward a new point of contact, inspired by the different shapes made by the group. Each move is a new proposal in the space, the same way that each line in a scene improvisation is a new proposal, moving the story on.

You can alter the speed and energy of the movement by calling 'staccato' or 'double-time' and 'slow-motion'.

You can begin to make calls, encouraging the players to take in the sound, shape, feeling of the word, as opposed to its literal meaning. Architectural words are good to start with: bridge, gate, sky-scraper, tree. You can give qualities to the object, like old, splintered, steel, sharp, sagging. Let the group play with each call. Again, the point is not to make a literal bridge, but to give a suggestion of it through movement.

Advanced players can make their own calls - saying a word as they move. The sound and movement should be done together, the word spoken with the same intensity and colour as the movement. Avoid reported words - when a player says a word as if they are outside of the game. Everything in this work should be integrated.

This game, as are the following games, is a very useful tool for Story Theatre. That is, it incorporates a whole group in the telling of a story.

Portraits

Portraits is like 1-2-De Croux, in the sense that the group works in a kind of clump in the centre, in contact with each other. **The rules are:**

- the group must move and freeze together
- all faces must be out for us
- every player must be in contact with someone else

To begin Portraits, line up six or so players at the back of the space. One player enters into the space, at high speed, full of energy, and freezes in a position in the centre of the room (make sure they are not too far forward). The following players join the first, one at a time, but very quickly, each finding a position in the portrait that is in contact with another player and faced out for us.

As they keep their freeze, check to see are there different levels (they should never be in a line!); can everyone be seen; is everyone in contact?

Send them back to the back of the space to try again to *Build a Portrait*. The building should be dynamic and staccato, with the tiniest of intervals between players. Send them back a few times until you're satisfied with the quality of the building.

Then keep them in their freeze and tell them that when you call 'change', the group, moving as a whole, will move in slow motion into a new position and freeze together. Call it and check that they freeze together, and they are all in contact, faces for us.

After a few slow motion calls, helping them to move exactly together, you can speed it up. The call 'Scramble' will have them moving very quickly all over the place and suddenly freezing. Try very short, tiny, quick changes, where there is only time to move an arm, the head, the face.

When they get the hang of it, you can try all kinds of calls:

- **Occupations** - i.e. plumbers, ballet dancers, priests, etc.
- **Family portraits** - i.e. the family who loves to argue, the family who eats all the time, the family who always watches TV, etc.
- **Stages of Life** - first day of life, first step, first day of school, first kiss, first exam, first time you failed, etc.
- What am I seeing, hearing, remembering/imagining.
- For building a portrait, you can give calls which influence the flavour of the portrait, like 'I am not going to tell you again!', 'Pleeease!', 'Oh, ooh, did you fall down?' etc.
- With the game established, there are loads of calls. Be very strict about keeping the integrity of the game: moving together, being seen and contact. Often they become excited with the calls and the game falls apart.

These are a series of calls Byrne Piven devised for his class for professional actors. They are less literal than the calls above, encouraging the players to internalise and personalise the calls rather than illustrate them:

- **What Am I Seeing:** a beautiful sunset, your house burning down, someone you really fancy across the library ...

- **What Am I Hearing:** your parents having a fight upstairs, your favorite song, a distant scream in the night ...
- **What Am I Remembering/Imagining:** a terrible argument with your mother (how is remembering a fight different from hearing one?), your first kiss, meeting your favourite film star, your wedding day ...

Constructs

Constructs is like Portraits, but instead of freezing, the whole group keeps moving together until you freeze them. The group takes on the sound, feeling, shape of the word and moves as a whole. The best calls are ones of moving objects: fire engine, pop-corn machine, antique violin, sports car, roller-coaster.

THE PAY-OFF

Who-What-Where On A Moving Object

Divide the group into three or four groups of four to six players each. Have them come up with a Who-What-and-Where, that is to decide Who they are to each other, Where they are and What activity they are doing. In this case the What is they are on a moving object of some kind that they can decide: a boat, a car, a pick-up truck. They do not need to decide anything else. Do not let them 'playwrite'. All the other information will come up in the improvisation.

One at a time, each group will perform their scene. Make sure they have a clear starting point (they can call 'curtain' or 'lights up' if it helps).

Help them to agree on the movement of the object. It must not be bumpier or faster for one player than another. Also, make sure they are giving and taking, rather than speaking over each other.

You may have a player or two who are exceptionally funny or gifted with dialogue, as most Irish players tend to be. As this is the Pay-Off, of course it should be fun, but the point of this work is not to come up with clever lines. Leave that for the writers. The point of this work is to give clear structures and techniques of acting through group agreement, listening and spontaneous play. In my experience, the funniest, most alive moments happen not when someone has thought of something funny, but when a player is

genuinely connected to the scene and allows something to happen
- something so fresh and spontaneous that surprises even them.

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