

## WORKSHOP: SCENE WORK

### INTRODUCTION

When preparing a scene for a class project, it is important to fully understand the context of the scene within the play from which it originated. For example, if you found Maggie the Cat's famous speech from Tennessee Williams' *Cat on a Hot Tin Roof* in a monolog book, you might think it is just an angry speech from a jealous wife to her husband. However, if you read the play in its entirety, you will discover a desperate woman clinging to a love and a way of life that were never really hers to begin with.

The scenes in this section, however, are not from plays. They are called lab scenes, which means they were written strictly from a "scientific" point of view. Each contains elements of theatre or acting that will help introduce young actors to scene work, acting, and the stage without being too overwhelming. Once you are comfortable with doing basic scenes like these, you may then select a more challenging scene, such as one from a play.

As you study each scene, keep in mind the evaluation your teacher will use to grade your performance. What kinds of elements will your teacher seek? He or she will look for you (and your partner, if you have one) to approach the performance area enthusiastically and confidently. Your introduction will be well-prepared, as will your performance. He or she will also look for your scene to have good energy, but remember that energy does not always mean big and loud. It will be difficult for your teacher to judge any of this, however, if he or she cannot hear or understand you, so remember to project, speak clearly, and be confident in your delivery. Use the appropriate non-verbal communication such as body language, gestures, and facial expressions to support your spoken lines.

Another element your teacher will seek is realistic, believable movement that reinforces the lines he or she is hearing. Good timing is also important. You may want to increase your rate of delivery or use pauses to keep the scene energetic and interesting. And most importantly, your teacher will look for signs of a well-developed, consistent, and believable character.

When your scene is finished, make sure you employ the type

of closing your teacher requested. For example, some teachers require students to "drop" their heads as a sign that the scene is over. Others require students to say "scene." If a performance is completely believable, it is difficult to tell when it is over without the assistance of lights or sound, so be sure to ask your teacher how he or she wishes you to end your scene.

One of the most important things your teacher hopes he or she will *not* notice in your performance is memorization trouble. When a scene is memorized to perfection, the actor will be completely focused on the performance rather than on which line comes next. However, when the actor is not one hundred percent confident in his or her memorization, that will be the first thing on his or her mind. Excellent memorization is the key to clearing the path to a good performance.

### Evaluation and Scene Work

You just completed the section on Evaluation. Now it is time to put what you learned to work by practicing and performing lab scenes. Use these clues to complete the list of elements your teacher will seek in your performances.

- E \_ \_ \_ u \_ \_ \_ \_ \_ c, confident approach
- Well-prepared \_ n \_ \_ \_ d \_ \_ \_ \_ \_
- \_ n \_ \_ \_ \_ \_ not always big and loud
- Speak \_ l \_ \_ \_ l \_ \_ and co \_ \_ d \_ \_ \_ \_ y
- Appropriate body language, gestures, and \_ f \_ \_ \_ \_ \_ \_ \_ \_ \_ s
- Realistic m \_ \_ \_ m \_ \_ \_ \_ \_
- Good t \_ \_ \_ \_ g
- Well-developed \_ h \_ \_ \_ c \_ \_ r
- The teacher's required \_ \_ \_ \_ \_ g
- M \_ \_ \_ \_ \_ to perfection

# Learning to Memorize

There are many ways to memorize. Many people have every song on their favorite radio station memorized. One reason is that songs are rhythmic and they often rhyme. These are two factors that make memorization easier. Have you ever had difficulty memorizing a series of items, but when the teacher put it to music, suddenly you were successful? Rhythm and rhyme are not normally a part of scene work, however, and even if they were, most teachers and directors instruct actors not to accent them.

Another reason why we memorize songs with little effort is that we hear them repeatedly. Repetition is often used in schools to assist students in memorizing difficult series or long bits of information. Some actors can read a script a few times and have all of their lines memorized, even long monologs. This is the exception and not the rule.

Many songs are stories set to music. Knowing the events of the story is a third reason why songs are often easy to memorize. In acting and scene work, most experts will agree that knowing and understanding the events in a play is the best way to memorize it. This is called *whole-part memorization*. An actor using this process will need to know the entire plot and become especially familiar with what happens in the play just before and immediately after the scene to be memorized. He will also learn all he can about the characters involved. Often a character will have a hidden agenda in his scene, and if the actor is not aware of this, the scene will make little sense. It is extremely difficult to memorize a scene that one does not even understand. After an actor has completed his research, he may then need to read it repeatedly until it is memorized. This requires a great deal of time even though much of the repetition is achieved in early rehearsals.

If repetition fails to work or if the actor cannot commit to the time-consuming process, he or she may wish to try a form of memorization less popular with professionals but often well-practiced by students: *part-whole memorization*. In part-whole memorization, the actor breaks the scene down into smaller, more manageable chunks. These are memorized individually and then pieced together bit by bit. While this is

generally quick, it is often used at the expense of fully comprehending the scene and its context within the play. As a result, performances may lack depth and characters may be shallow and lifeless.

Discover which method or combination of methods works best for you. If the above methods do not produce positive results, try one of these suggestions:

- Record your lines onto a cassette tape and listen to them over and over again while riding to and from work or school.
- Write your lines into a notebook. You may find that reading lines does little for memorization but that writing them helps with retention.
- Use creative devices for memorizing particularly challenging parts within a scene. For example, find a way to connect the last word of one line to the first word of the next line.
- If the scene is written in a difficult language or pattern, you may wish to try writing the scene in your own words and then converting it back into the language of the playwright.
- Once your scene is memorized, if you find yourself needing to peek at the same places repeatedly, you may wish to highlight those in a different color and spend more time working on just those spots.



Gigi (left) and Grace explore the characters in their scene work using whole-part memorization.

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### SCENE PREPARATION STEP ONE: PLAY BACKGROUND AND CULTURE

Before you begin to develop your character, you need to know what kind of play you are performing. What is its purpose? How is it staged? All literature tries to convey some truth about humanity or the world to its audience. What is your play trying to say? Research and answer the following questions to find out the answers to these questions for your scene. ANSWER THOROUGHLY. This is a Level 3-4 evidence for MTs 1, 2, and 3 for semester one.

#### RECEPTION

1. When was the play first published?
2. When and where was it first performed?
3. How was the play first received?
4. What genre of play is it considered to be?

#### THE PLAYWRIGHT

1. Where is the playwright from?
2. Was this the first play he/she wrote?
3. Is this his/her most famous work? If not, which one is? Why?
4. Has the playwright ever said why he/she wrote the drama? What did he/she say?

#### THE PLAY

1. What is the setting of the play? When and where does it take place?
2. How many different settings are there in the play?
3. How many different characters?
4. How many different scenes?
5. How would you describe the language of the play?
6. What are considered to be the main themes/topics of the play?
7. Why might these themes be important for your performance?
8. What kind of stage directions (characterization in italics, especially at the beginning of the scene) are given for your character?

#### VARIOUS

1. Is there anything else interesting you discovered about the play that may help you better understand its purpose, and what you should try to convey in your performance?

# Rehearsals and Performances

Now it is time to get to work. You will begin rehearsing your scene, getting it ready for your first performance. Your teacher will give you details on his or her specific performance expectations.

You will probably have a week or two in class to prepare your scenes. The amount of time will depend on the structure of your class period. For example, if your class meets every other day for an hour and a half, you may have two weeks to prepare. During this time, attendance is crucial. If your class meets every day for an hour, then you may be prepared in just a week. Ask your teacher in advance when he or she plans to conduct performances and write the date in the calendar provided in this book. You will want to pace yourself accordingly. Use this guide when planning your rehearsals:

**Day 1** — Rehearse your scene using your script. Mark ideas in the script using a pencil. Clarify any confusion early if you do not understand a word or a part of the script.

**Day 2** — Block your scene and write it in your script in pencil. *Blocking* is the planning of the movement in the scene. When will you sit? When will you stand and cross? Continue to work on memorization.

**Day 3** — Continue to rehearse using your script, but make it your goal to be doing the scene without the script by the end of this class period.

**Day 4** — Sit down and read your script again. Now that you have it basically worked out, it is important to make sure you did not miss anything, especially if you are working without a director. If you are required to use props, now is the time to work them in. Plan out your introduction and start practicing it each time you rehearse your scene.

**Day 5** — Have someone watch your scene and critique it, and do the same for them. Without arguing or defending your performance, thank them for their critique. You may now decide if you want to change anything based on their criticism. Spend the remainder of your rehearsal time polishing (perfecting) your scene for performances.

Have you wondered when your scene is good enough for a performance? While the answer is simple, getting there and knowing when you are there may be a bit more difficult. Your scene will be ready for performance when it feels like second nature to you. In other words, when you feel like you could do it in your sleep, you are ready. It must be one hundred percent memorized, including lines and actions. If you are working with a partner, the two of you should be synchronized or almost instinctually paired in the scene. You also want to make sure that you are obeying the most basic rules of acting, such as being loud and clear, remaining visible to the audience, and staying true to the script and the author's intent. Most importantly, the scene must have good energy throughout — even during silent pauses.

Now that you are ready, it's time to perform. Many teachers have their students perform scenes just once, while others prefer to see them twice (about two weeks apart). The benefits of doing each scene twice far outweigh doing them one time. For example, the audience and teacher will give the performers quite a bit of feedback after the first performances. Students should take that feedback and make improvements to their scenes. Polishing scenes after a first performance is also similar to how actors polish a play after receiving feedback from the director. Finally, a perfected scene is great audition material, but few scenes are of that caliber after just one performance. Ask your teacher how many times you will perform your scene and record the dates in your calendar.

Complete the worksheet on the following page to see how a good classroom performance would look even with some unexpected interruptions:



*Melissa and Cody find a secluded hallway near their teacher's room to fine tune their duet.*

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### THE SEVEN LAYERS OF TENSION

Jacques Lecoq developed an approach to acting using seven levels of tension. These changed and developed during his practice and have been further developed by other practitioners.

This is a list of names given to each level of tension, along with a suggestion of a corresponding performance style that could exist in that tension.

**1** Exhausted or catatonic. The Jellyfish. There is no tension in the body at all. Begin in a complete state of relaxation. If you have to move or speak, it is a real effort. See what happens when you try to speak.

**2** Laid back - the “Californian” (soap opera). Many people live at this level of tension. Everything you say is cool, relaxed, probably lacking in credibility. The casual throw-away line – “I think I’ll go to bed now”.

**3** Neutral or the “Economic” (contemporary dance). It is what it is. There is nothing more, nothing less. The right amount. No past or future. You are totally present and aware. It is the state of tension before something happens. Think of a cat sitting comfortably on a wall, ready to leap up if a bird comes near. You move with no story behind your movement.

**4** Alert or Curious (farce). Look at things. Sit down. Stand up. Indecision. Think M. Hulot or Mr Bean. Levels 1 - 4 are our everyday states.

**5** Suspense or the Reactive (19th century melodrama). *Is there a bomb in the room?* The crisis is about to happen. All the tension is in the body, concentrated between the eyes. An inbreath. There’s a delay to your reaction. The body reacts. John Cleese.

**6** Passionate (opera). There is a bomb in the room. The tension has exploded out of the body. Anger, fear, hilarity, despair. It’s difficult to control. You walk into a room and there is a lion sitting there. There is a snake in the shower.

**7** Tragic (end of King Lear when Lear is holding Cordelia in his arms). The bomb is about to go off! Body can’t move. Petrified. The body is solid tension.

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### **GENERIC SCENES**

After you have really studied and internalized the 7 levels of tension in your small groups, read through the following scenes to know what they say. Then, in pairs, get up and perform one of the scenes in front of your small group.

The advanced drama leader will tell you what level of tension to begin the scene in. You must act out the scene with whatever emotion is appropriate for that level of tension! AND! He/she may shout a *different* level of tension at any time. So be ready to switch gears! Have fun with it!

#### **Scene One: “What did you do last night?”**

A: Hi!

B: Hello.

A: How’s everything? B:

Fine. I guess.

A: Do you know what time it is? B:

No. Not exactly.

A: Don’t you have a watch? B:

Not on me.

A: Well?

B: Well what?

A: What did you do last night? B:

What do you mean?

A: What did you do last night? B:

Nothing.

A: Nothing?

B: I said, nothing!

A: I’m sorry I asked. B:

That’s all right.

**Scene Two: "I'm going away."**

A: Hi!

B: Hello.

A: You all right? B:

Yes.

A: Are you sure?

B: Yes, I'm sure. A little headache, that's all. A:

Oh good. You want some aspirin?

B: No. Don't be so helpful, OK? A:

You are upset.

B: Good Lord!

A: OK, OK. I thought you might want to talk. B:

About what?

A: About anything. B:

I'm going away.

A: What do you mean?

B: I'm going away, that's all. A:

Where?

B: Not far. Don't get excited. A:

When?

B: Now. *[Starts to leave]*