

CHAPTER 6

Improvisation



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W

hen you and your friends get together, how does the conversation begin? Does one of your friends hand out a written script for you to follow? Probably not. Most conversation occurs spontaneously—without a written sheet of instructions telling you what to say and without rehearsal. When young people gather together, the conversation might begin with “Guess what!” or “Hey, man, what’s up?” or “You won’t believe what I just saw!”

At home, a conversation might begin when someone in your family asks, “What happened at school today?” At this point, anyone might chime in with a comment. You might tell about forgetting your lunch money; your little sister might tell about getting a perfect score on her spelling test; your older brother might tell about the substitute teacher in his math class.

In theatre, conversation between characters is called dialogue. Usually, the actors use a script—a written copy of the dialogue. But actors can also **improvise**—that is, work without a script. This chapter will introduce you to a style of unrehearsed, unscripted theatre called **improvisation**. In improvisation, the actors bring imaginary circumstances to life through action and dialogue. Thus, improvisation is a form of acting.

improvise

to ad-lib, or invent dialogue and actions without a script or rehearsal.

improvisation

a spontaneous style of theatre using unrehearsed and unscripted acting scenes.



Improvisation

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- ◆ Understand the process of improvisation.
- ◆ Improvise action and dialogue in character.
- ◆ Create theatre through group effort.

Like a dinner-table discussion with your family, an improvisation is a spontaneous, unrehearsed, unscripted dialogue.



Warm Up



I imagine that you are a new student in this class. At your teacher's signal, begin walking about the room, introducing yourself to other students. Begin a conversation with at least two other students.

scene

- (1) a short situation to be acted out, as in improvisation, with a beginning, middle, and end.
- (2) a subdivision of an act in a play.

Your first try at improvisation might be like your first ride on a giant roller coaster—a little frightening, but thrilling.

In improvisation, you will be working without a script. You will say whatever comes to mind in response to the dialogue of others. Making up the lines as you go along will be a fun way to learn to “think on your feet.” You will discover that the more you listen, the more you can participate, and the easier improvisation will become. Improvisation gives actors the opportunity to work together in an informal way developing and creating characters—personalities different from one's own—before beginning scene work. It is also an excellent way to develop concentration, exercise imagination, and become more self-confident while at the same time learning some acting fundamentals.

Listening and responding, two good acting fundamentals, can be learned through improvisation. Actors must learn to listen to each other and to respond to what is being said. These fundamentals are keys to clear, understandable improvisations.

Besides being a good training tool for the actor, improvisation is really fun. In the beginning, the **scenes**, or short situations, may seem a little silly. Feeling silly can come from being nervous about a first-time experience. Whenever we try something new, we get jittery or afraid. This happens because we want to present a good image in front of our friends and we don't want to “goof up.”

Think back to when you were learning to swim or trying to ride a bicycle or stand up on roller skates. If you are like most people, those first attempts weren't easy, but they were fun and exciting. Taking a risk and trying new experiences helps you develop confidence and pride.

Remember the thrill of riding an exciting amusement park ride for the first time? Improvisation is something like that. Relax and try to remember that this is a learning experience, not a performance. Eventually, you and your classmates will enjoy listening to the strange dialogues that just “pop out” spontaneously.



Now think of what you would say if your teacher said any of the following lines:

“I can’t believe you are late to my class again.”

“I’m afraid you didn’t pass the test.”

“Why is your homework late?”

Good job! You have just thought of dialogue to use in an improvisation. Try saying your lines aloud. Now that you see how easy it is to think up dialogue, you’re ready to learn some additional information about creating improvisations.

Parts of an Improvisation

The basic story line of a well-constructed improvisation includes a beginning, a middle, and an end. These are the same basic parts you will find in every story, movie, or play (see Figure 6–1).

The beginning should introduce the audience to the cast of characters, establish the setting for the scene, or situation, and set up the conflict. The **conflict**, or problem, is the obstacle that the characters must overcome. Opening dialogue should prepare the audience for the scene by letting them know what happened before the scene began.

In the second part of the improvisation, the conflict becomes more complicated as each character establishes what he or she wants or needs. Here it is important for the characters to establish their wants and needs through clearly defined actions and revealing dialogue. The audience must believe the characters and understand their relationships to each other.

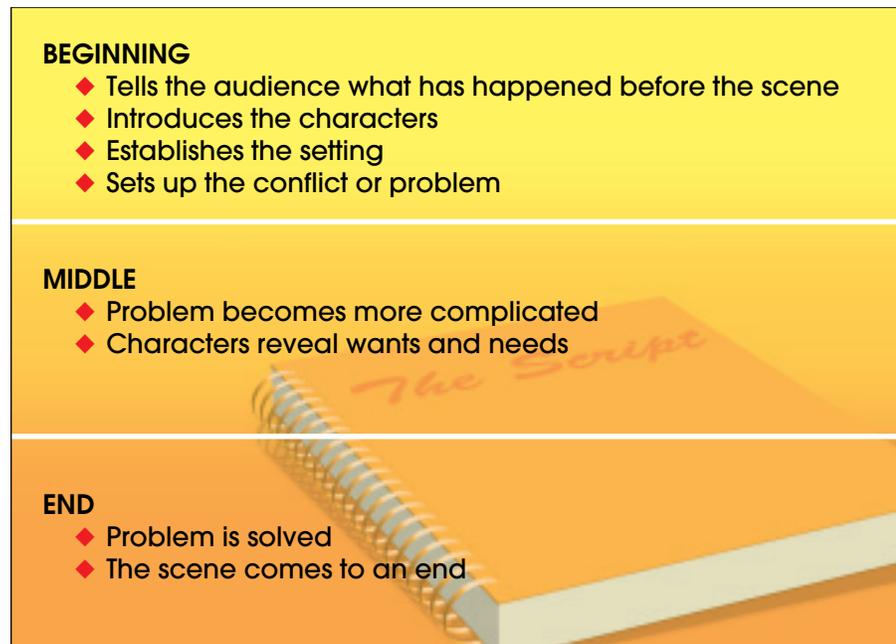
The end is the third part of the improvisation. Here the characters solve the problem and conclude the scene.

conflict

the problem or obstacles a literary character must overcome, often a struggle between opposing forces.

Figure 6–1

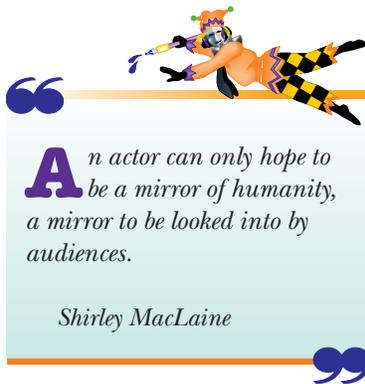
Three Basic Parts of an Improvisation.



Guidelines for Improvisation

When an improvisation involves working with another person or a group, all the participants need to follow the same guidelines. When the numbered guidelines are used, the improvisation will seem as if it were planned and rehearsed.

1. Before you begin the scene, decide who you are, what you want, and what your relationship is to the other characters. In your early improvisations, you will have very little time to plan or to create an original character. Therefore, you should draw on your memory of real-life characters and imitate them.
2. Once you have established a character in your mind, you need to communicate that character to your audience through your dialogue and actions. Before you begin, make the necessary changes in your own voice and body. Ask yourself several questions before you begin: If you were really the person in this situation, what would you want or need? How would you go about obtaining it? How would you sound? How would you stand or walk? What habits would you have?
3. Try hard to remain the same person during the improvisation. Stay in character. **“Breaking character”** occurs when you say or do something that is inconsistent with the role you are creating. Laughing at yourself or others during a scene is a common form of breaking character. While playing a character with an English accent, if you accidentally use your own voice, you are breaking character. A character’s physical traits also need to remain constant. If you create a character with a limp, momentarily forgetting and walking normally is breaking character. If you accidentally break character, get back on track and continue the scene.
4. Begin your dialogue with enthusiasm and confidence.
5. It doesn’t really matter who talks first. In scenes with just two characters, you will find it easy to take turns speaking. In larger groups, there will not be a set pattern for the conversation. All of the actors should try hard to participate in the dialogue.
6. It is very important in improvisation to pay attention, listening carefully to what is being said and following what is happening in the scene. Then you can respond appropriately. A rhythm, or pace, will develop once the dialogue and action have begun. This will be much like the tempo of a piece of music. To keep the conversation flowing, concentrate on what is being said, not on yourself. When you really listen to what is being said, you will be surprised how easy it is to think of something to say in response.
7. Remember to keep the dialogue moving. In other words, keep talking. Long periods of silence, unless filled with actions, are boring to the audience. Be especially careful not to dominate the scene by doing all the talking.
8. Avoid “dead-end” words or phrases. Responses such as “No,” “Okay,” “So?,” and “Well?” stop the dialogue. These phrases make it difficult for the other players in the scene to continue the conversation or action. And disagreeing with what your partner



An actor can only hope to be a mirror of humanity, a mirror to be looked into by audiences.

Shirley MacLaine

breaking character

losing concentration or getting out of character. Using dialogue or behavior inconsistent with the part you are creating.

Enthusiasm and confidence are essential elements in improvisation.



If we're improvising a scene and you choose a position, if I want to make it a scene, I've got to take the opposite position. If I agree with you, we don't have a scene.

Mike Nichols, Director

- has said with negative responses such as “That’s not right,” or “No, she’s not” makes it difficult to do much more than argue. Another roadblock is to not respond when your partner makes a statement or asks a question. When a member of the improvisation replies with a response such as “Oh?” “Really?” or “What?” build on it and continue the dialogue.
9. Avoid questions that can be answered by “yes” or “no.” If you must ask questions, it is much better to ask open-ended questions. A question such as “Why did you come home so late?” would give the other players an easy opening into the conversation.
 10. Always look for a way to end the scene. When the natural ending occurs, conclude the scene. Remember, your group is working as an ensemble, so the ending might not be your idea. Part of the fun is finding out what happens to end the scene.

Using Improvisation in Real Life

Many young people participate in behavior that is dangerous or likely to lead to serious consequences: distrust from your parents, a police record, or mention of the incident in your school records. Improvisation can help prepare you for dealing with difficult, even life-threatening situations. Perhaps some of your peers are engaging in self-destructive behavior. When you find yourself caught in an uncomfortable situation, it helps if you have previously acted out courses of action. Some of the situations in this section may lead to classroom discussion. Use your classroom discussion to think of other ways the situation could have been handled. Your class may want to compile a list of other situations for possible improvisations.



Follow the guidelines for improvisation in the situations assigned by your teacher. Each scene can be played as a duet or as an ensemble with the entire acting company. Add additional characters to the scene if they are needed.

1. Sticky Situations

- a. You and a friend return home from a ball game to find your house locked.
- b. Early on a cold winter morning, the car won't start.
- c. Your mother discovers that she has misplaced the only set of car keys.
- d. You discover that one of your favorite shoes is missing.
- e. You and your friends find yourselves locked in the school building on Friday afternoon.
- f. You and two friends are caught outside the movies in a severe rainstorm.
- g. A newly engaged teacher loses her diamond ring on the school campus. You offer to help her look for the ring.
- h. By accident, your best friend dyes her hair red.
- i. A student you know forgets his lunch money on the first day of school. He asks to borrow money from you.
- j. You are a tough guy who lost your last quarter in the soft drink machine.
- k. Your best friend gives you a tacky gift in front of some peers you would like to impress.
- l. The principal catches you and two other outstanding students skipping class.
- m. You bring the wrong book to the class of the toughest teacher in school.
- n. Your father tells you that you must baby-sit your little sister on the night of the biggest football game of the season.
- o. One of your friends wants to play a trick on the substitute teacher, who happens to be your mom's best friend.
- p. Your friend is wearing a new shirt. While eating in the school cafeteria, you spill red fruit punch on it.

2. School Situations. Many situations that occur at school can be the basis for wonderful improvisations. Working with a partner, one of you will play the role of the student; the other will play another character in the scene.

- a. Your locker is stuck.
- b. Your best friend gets the part you wanted in the school play.
- c. You forgot to study for a test.
- d. You lost your lunch money.
- e. You're caught passing notes in class.
- f. You forgot to finish your homework.
- g. The new outfit you are wearing violates the school dress code.
- h. You are a new student who can't find the right classroom.
- i. You didn't make the football team.
- j. You are late to class.
- k. You lose your new jacket the first day you wear it to school.

- l.** You discover during class that your best friend has invited your boyfriend (or girlfriend) to the movies.
- m.** You notice that your friend's socks don't match.
- n.** You dislike math, but the school computer has misprinted your class schedule, and you end up in an advanced math class.
- o.** You have to make a speech in class, and you are unprepared.
- p.** You forget part of your costume on the day of the play, and you have to tell the director.

3. Serious Improvisations: What Do I Do Now?

- a.** While on a school-sponsored trip, your friend decides to walk out of a restaurant without paying the check. You are confronted by the trip sponsor.
- b.** Your friend, who has been caught smoking in school several times, asks you to hold her cigarettes so that she won't get caught again.
- c.** A new friend hangs around with a group of teenagers who are known to get in trouble. Your friend invites you to join the group after school.
- d.** Your friend's mother appears to have been drinking when she picks you and your friend up after a party. She insists on driving you home.
- e.** While on a school trip, someone hides alcohol in your luggage. You get caught.
- f.** Two seemingly nice guys you've just met offer to buy you and your friend pizza after the movies.
- g.** A new car in the parking lot at school belongs to a teacher you dislike. Your friend suggests that you scratch the car with a key to get back at the teacher.
- h.** You are alone at your house. Two of your friends stop by to visit. Your parents do not allow you to entertain guests unless they are home.
- i.** You share a locker in the gym with a very popular athlete. You open the locker one morning and discover a small plastic bag with something in it that looks suspicious.
- j.** Your friend wants you to slip out of your bedroom window after your parents are asleep.
- k.** You and your friend notice an expensive camera lying on the back-seat of an unlocked car. Your friend would really like to have the camera.
- l.** While spending the night at a friend's house, one of your friends produces a can of spray paint and a paper bag to get high.
- m.** You and your date arrive at a party and discover that the host is serving alcohol. Everyone at the party is a minor.
- n.** Your group suggests writing hate letters to a foreign exchange student, threatening what you will do if he doesn't go back home.
- o.** When the boy next to you in class opens his backpack, you see what you think is a switchblade.
- p.** A classmate offers you some prescription medicine for your headache.
- q.** Several times your friend comes to school with unexplained bruises. You suspect abuse.
- r.** An extremely thin friend who sits with you in the school cafeteria never eats lunch, yet constantly complains of how fat she is. You suspect that she has an eating disorder.
- s.** Your cousin has been slipping out of the house in the middle of the night and driving the family car around town. He doesn't have a driver's license.



- t. One of your friends has the teacher's answers to your math textbook. He offers you the answers.
- u. You and a friend are hanging out at the mall, and your friend decides to shoplift a CD from one of the shops. He asks you to watch for the manager.
- v. Your friend has just been dumped by his girlfriend. He doesn't think life is worth living.
- w. When you walk down the hall at school, a certain group of students leer at you, shouting "catcalls." You are uncomfortable.
- x. Your friend has no rules at his house, and your parents won't allow you to spend the night. Your friend is having a big party, and you want to attend.
- y. A group of your friends is going to meet at a local park to gang up on a group from another school. Your best friend wants you to be there.
- z. When you are absent from school, your best friend "shares your secret" with the teacher.

4. Opening Lines. A common problem in improvisation is thinking of an opening line. Your teacher will assign partners for this activity. One of you will begin with the opening line; the other will continue the dialogue.

- a. "I can't believe you said that."
- b. "Where did you get that?"
- c. "I have a date with John Saturday night!"
- d. "That's mine!"
- e. "How could you doubt me?"
- f. "Stay here! I'm going to call the wrecker."
- g. "What is that supposed to mean?"
- h. "Wait for me!"
- i. "How can you be so insensitive?"
- j. "I told you to pick that up!"
- k. "So, does that mean we have to do this assignment?"
- l. "I need to talk to you."
- m. "Did you really believe him?"
- n. "Tell me one more time."
- o. "Lower your voice."
- p. "What do you mean, I have to leave?"

5. Creating Endings. Thinking of appropriate endings for improvisations takes lots of experience. Try working with a partner to create a situation that could end with one of these final statements.

- a. "You're grounded!"
- b. "Aw, Mom!"
- c. "I love you, too."
- d. "For the life of me, I cannot imagine."
- e. "Good night!"
- f. "Stay here! I'm going to call the fire truck."
- g. "Don't be like that!"
- h. "You're not getting a puppy, and that's final."
- i. "I'll meet you at the police station."
- j. "Thank you so much. You're a lifesaver."
- k. "What about your mom?"
- l. "Very nice!"
- m. "Look what you did!"
- n. "Well, if you need anything, just ask."
- o. "I'm really sorry."

OUR THEATRE HERITAGE

Historical and Cultural Perspectives



Commedia dell'arte

Commedia dell'arte was a form of improvisational theatre that began during the Renaissance, in the early sixteenth century. Troupes of actors toured the Italian countryside performing anywhere they could find an audience.

Each troupe had a set of stock characters, familiar characters, who appeared in most plays. Characters such as *Pantalone*, an old man, *Arlecchino* or *Harlequin*, the clever prankster, and *Pulchinello*, the malicious servant, are examples of exaggerated stock characters. These comic characters were easy for the viewers to identify dressed in their leather masks or half masks and special costumes. Other characters such as the young hero, the heroine, and the *fontesca*, a serving maid, were unmasked.



Hero

The plot for the story was usually based around the lives of the young hero and heroine, who were very much in love. Problems occurred when the heroine's grumpy old father tried to hamper their romance. The *zanni*, male servants, and the *Fontessa*, created comedy by helping or hindering the couple's courtship.



Pantalone and Harlequin

Performers in the *commedia dell'arte* memorized a basic outline for the action; however, dialogue was improvised, created on the spot without a script. Audiences in the 1500s enjoyed this style of theatre and were always eager to watch a performance. ■



Pierrot

LESSON 2

Role-Playing

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- ◆ Develop skill in improvising action and dialogue.
- ◆ Identify experiences from other classes to role-play.

Warm Up



Discuss with your class specific historical events that have been altered or influenced by the role of one person.

role-playing

trying on the role of others, or assuming the part of another person in society.

Try on the roles of these immigrants coming to America. What is each one of them thinking as they view the Statue of Liberty? Are they excited? Fearful? How would you react in their place?

Have you ever wondered what you would have done if you had been at the scene of a famous historical event?

- ◆ What if you had been a runaway slave trying to find your way to freedom?
- ◆ What if you had been an early colonist during the winter of 1612?
- ◆ What if you had been a twelve-year-old seamstress working under terrible conditions in a garment factory during the early 1900s?
- ◆ What if you had been in Dallas, Texas, watching the parade, the day President Kennedy was assassinated?

You were not there, but you can experience the event through a form of improvisational theatre called role-playing.

Role-playing is taking on the role of a person other than yourself in an improvisation based on a given dramatic situation. Role-playing can help you grow socially. When you “try on” the roles of others, you have the opportunity to discover how they feel and what they want or need. Thinking as someone else helps you to expand your way of looking at things and strengthens your own decision-making skills. Often, the views and opinions you act out will be different from your own. Role-playing allows you to take safe risks with thoughts and ideas in order to establish your own set of values and beliefs.



ACTION



- 1. Bringing History to Life.** Think about some of the historical events you have learned about in social studies or history, or look through your history book. Make a list of characters and circumstances that could be acted out. How could these scenes be re-created through role-playing? Select a character to portray in one of the situations. Remember to create the attitudes, voices, and actions that the real people would have experienced.
- 2. Historical Scenes.** Invite social studies or history classes to suggest or outline different historical scenes based on their units of study.
- 3. Presenting History to History Class.** Prepare the scenes as you would an improvisation. Invite the social studies or history classes to watch the scenes and judge them for authenticity.



Point of View

LESSON OBJECTIVES

- ◆ Develop skill in improvising action and dialogue.
- ◆ Confront various personal behaviors through role-playing and role reversal.
- ◆ Demonstrate attitude changes and various viewpoints through role-playing.

Warm Up



Discuss the meaning of the following quote from *To Kill a Mockingbird* with the members of your acting group: “If you can learn a simple trick, Scout, you’ll get along a lot better with all kinds of folks. You never really understand a person until you consider things from his point of view—until you climb into his skin and walk around in it.”

The way we think, feel, or act is called a point of view. Our personal point of view toward a person or situation is determined by who we are and also by where we are in our lives. Our needs and desires also influence the way we view a situation. A three-year-old who wants a dog would view the animal simply as a plaything and would not see the responsibilities that go along with having a pet. You, too, might want a dog, but because you are older, you would understand the expenses and responsibilities that are involved.

When we have the opportunity to think and act like someone else, we should consider, or evaluate, the situation from another point of view. A father being transferred to a job in a different city would have different needs, desires, and responsibilities than the other members of the family. If you were playing the role of the father, you would have to think about the situation from his point of view. In acting out the role, you would use appropriate dialogue and actions that would reflect his viewpoint to the audience. Acting out situations from different points of view helps you to become more sensitive and understanding as problems are confronted and worked out.





“curtain”

a verbal command starting or ending a scene.

“freeze”

a verbal command given by the director to stop the dialogue and movement in a scene.

1. Exploring Different Points of View. To explore different points of view, try acting out some situations. By playing more than one role in each scene, you will be challenged to extend your own point of view.

Work with your class to establish characters with four very different viewpoints for each situation given. Work with your acting company to select one of the scenes to play, or try one your teacher suggests. Next, decide who will play each role.

Prepare a sign for each viewpoint by writing the character’s name on a 12-by-4-inch piece of poster board with colored markers. Punch one hole at each end of the sign. Run approximately 10 inches of yarn through the holes to create a hanging sign. Wearing these signs will help the players maintain their particular point of view.

Begin the scene when your teacher or a member of your group calls **“curtain.”** The scene should begin with each player acting “in character.” Each participant in the scene should try to stand, sit, walk, talk, and respond as suggested by the character’s point of view. When your teacher calls **“freeze,”** all dialogue and action should stop.

Then each sign will be passed one character to the right. After the signs are exchanged, the dialogue must continue with the viewpoints established by the four beginning characters. After all participants have explored the four roles, the scene should draw to an appropriate conclusion. If an ending cannot be reached, your teacher will verbally terminate the scene by calling out “curtain.”

Here are some suggested scenes to play. Four different viewpoints are given for the first scene. For each of the remaining scenes, work with your group to develop viewpoints for each character.

- a. A student has not been turning in her homework. The teacher calls a conference with the parent and the principal.
 - The student thinks that the teacher doesn’t like her because the teacher keeps “nagging” her about the homework.
 - The single parent, working two jobs, wants her daughter to pass.
 - The teacher, who really cares, wants to give the student another chance.
 - The tough, authoritarian principal thinks the student needs more discipline at home.
- b. A teenager has abused her phone privileges. A family discussion includes the parent, a nosy neighbor, the teenager, and a younger sibling.
- c. A student who has just moved from a small town to a large city is having a hard time adjusting to the new school environment. The principal and a concerned teacher call the new student in for a conference and invite a popular, well-adjusted student to make suggestions.
- d. A teenager has stayed out past curfew. He arrives home to find his mother, grandmother, and kid sister worried and “waiting up.”
- e. A star athlete’s grades are extremely low in science class. To stay on the track team, he must raise his grades. He is thinking of cheating on a major test. He discusses the situation with an older brother who dropped out of school, a classmate who cheats often, and his best friend, who is in the National Honor Society and would never cheat on a test, no matter what the circumstances.

■ ■ SPOTLIGHT ON TERMS ■ ■

An important part of theatre is understanding the terminology, or vocabulary, used. Add the new terms and definitions to the vocabulary section of your theatre notebook or folder.

■ ■ FOCUS ON FACTS ■ ■

1. In theatre, what is conversation between actors called?
2. What is improvisation?
3. What are the three parts of an improvisation? What should happen in each part?
4. What is meant by “breaking character”?
5. In improvisation, what are “dead-end” phrases? How can you avoid them?
6. When do you end an improvisation?
7. What is role-playing?
8. What is a point of view?

■ ■ REFLECTIONS ■ ■

Discuss the following questions with your class or answer them on paper as instructed by your teacher.

1. What did you learn about the needs and feelings of each of the characters you portrayed?
2. Which roles were the most difficult to portray? Why?
3. Which roles were the easiest to portray? Why?
4. What were some strong points of the improvisations?
5. How did your viewpoints change as you changed characters?
6. If you could play one of your scenes again, which scene would you choose? What would you do differently?

■ ■ THEATRE IN YOUR LIFE ■ ■

Discuss aloud or as a journal entry in your theatre notebook the ways improvisation and role-playing help you in real-life situations.

■ ■ ENCORE ■ ■

1. Work with your acting company to create an improvisational scene based on a popular television sitcom. Use classroom furniture to create a set for the show. Act out the situation, trying to portray the characters as realistically as they appear on television. When each acting company has completed its scene, discuss the similarities and differences between the classroom show and the television show.

If your class has access to a video camera, it would be worthwhile to film the scenes and later view the tape as if you were watching a televised program. As a class, watch and analyze the videotaped class sitcoms. Discuss with your class the changes that are needed in each scene to create a program as believable as “real” television. As a result of videotaping your improvisation, what have you learned about acting for television?

2. Create a new language for improvisation using only the letters of the alphabet. The dialogue “Are you going with me?” might become “A bcd kyz oe mni?” Avoid spelling out real words. This technique, sometimes called “gibberish,” uses silly sounds to help you focus on *the way* you speak rather than on what you say. Concentrate on staying in character as you replay the Action activities in this chapter using gibberish.
3. Here are some additional scenes for practicing the development of different viewpoints as you did in the activity on the preceding page.
 - a. A doctor discusses a father’s need for a kidney transplant with the father, the son, and the grandmother. The grandmother and the son are possible donors.
 - b. Three friends are walking to school when they are approached by a drug dealer who has an easy way for them to make some quick cash.
 - c. An eighth-grade girl who lives with her grandparents wants to attend the high school homecoming dance with a tenth-grade boy. Her brother knows that the boy has been in trouble with the law.