



## Part **ONE**



# *Interpreting the Drama*



The actors' skills,  
developed and pol-  
ished through dedica-  
tion and hard work,  
bring a play to life.  
(Play: *Grease*)



## 1

# Improvisation

Mirroring each other's actions, these two actors perform an exercise in improvisation. Improvisation can be fun and help you gain confidence as an actor.



*General improvisations often give actors an insight beyond their words by helping them to “see the word” and achieve a reality for the scene.*

—VIOLA SPOLIN, AUTHOR

# SETTING THE SCENE

## Focus Questions

What is improvisation?

What makes improvisation a foundation for interpretation?

How do character-centered and situation-centered storytelling differ?

What are the important factors in creating a successful improvisation?

## Vocabulary

improvisation

spontaneity

"illusion of the first time"

scene-stealing

character-centered approach

situation-centered approach

motivated sequence

Are you ready to act? A technique that will help you gain confidence is called improvisation. **Improvisation** is the portrayal of a character or a scene without rehearsal or preparation. You will make up the character, the lines, and the action as you go along, without a formal script. You will enjoy yourself as you learn some of the fundamentals of acting and become better acquainted with your classmates. Imagination is the key to improvisation. You must learn to say the most with the least; that is, you must convey personality and physical traits, conflicts and desires, and age and dress with a minimum of aids. Sometimes you may be allowed to use a few props, but your character must be conveyed primarily by voice, body language, and movement.

**Spontaneity**, credibility, and freshness in each performance are the goals of the director of a play, the challenge to the cast, and the pleasure of the audience. After weeks of rehearsals or after many performances, however, making the audience feel that each performance is the first—the **"illusion of the first time"**—is sometimes



difficult; then the play becomes stale. Improvisations are enjoyable in their you-never-know-what's-coming-next freshness. They should help you to recognize the sparkle that comes with a first-time performance. Through improvisation you will learn to appreciate the most important factor in the execution of lines or actions—timing. Play casts may rehearse for weeks to achieve the kind of fresh, natural timing that can come as you improvise.

## **About Improvisation**

### CUE

Drama began as descriptive action expressed only by facial expressions and body movement (pantomime). It then became stylized dance. Finally, it developed into formal dramas.

Improvisation is one of the foundations of interpretation, emphasizing creativity and imagination. The beginning performer, however, often wants to experience the actual emotion rather than to portray it. The student must always bear in mind that a person may go only so far and still be acting. Beyond that point, the actor *is* rather than *is pretending to be*.

What is happening now is the keynote of improvisation. Improvisation focuses your attention on natural actions and reactions and should force you to concentrate on immediate responses. All action should be motivated by what you already know about the characters and situation and by what is brought forth as you improvise. You do not have the advantage—or disadvantage—of knowing what lines come next in a script. You must play the role as it develops. You will learn how a scene may change direction as the result of a single line or action. You may even find it necessary to meet one of the toughest challenges that faces an actor: to “do nothing”

Part of improvisation is not knowing what anyone else will say or do. Notice how attentive everyone in this scene is to the central character.



effectively—that is, to be visible onstage but not to play an active part in the scene. In such cases, you must get the audience to accept your presence without being distracted by you. To call attention to your presence would be **scene-stealing**, or diverting attention from the other actors. You will learn to appreciate the interrelationships of the characters and how essential it is that an actor be a member of a team.

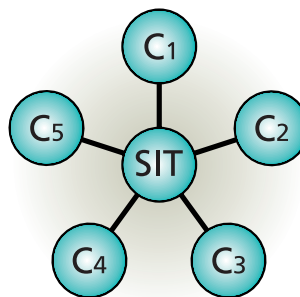
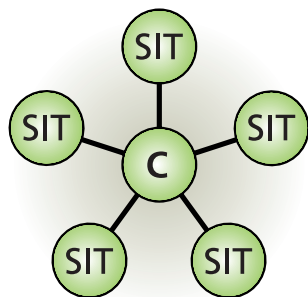
## *Character-Centered and Situation-Centered Approaches*

The two basic approaches to telling a story are through character-centered action and through situation-centered action. The **character-centered** approach focuses on a character or a group of characters who experience different situations one after another. This approach emphasizes each character's response to those situations as they occur. *Man of La Mancha* and *Big River* are examples of this approach.

The **situation-centered** approach typically takes a single situation and places a number of characters in the situation to demon-



*Little Shop of Horrors*, a situation-centered play, demonstrates how different personalities respond to a single situation.



Every stage happening is based on one of two conditions: (1) a single character facing multiple situations, or (2) multiple characters facing a single situation.

strate how different personalities will respond to the same event. Many improvisations are set up as situation centered. Many television programs are situation centered. This is why they are referred to as "sit-coms," or situation comedies. Plays such as *Arsenic and Old Lace* and *Little Shop of Horrors* are situation centered.

## Exercises

### Improvisation

- 1. The Mirror** Face a partner. One person is the activator; the other is the responder. The activator moves the hands, the head, and eventually any part of the body while pretending to look into a mirror. The responder matches the actions of the activator without making physical contact. The goals are to develop concentration skills, to learn to work smoothly with a partner, and to feel the single impulse of an action. Keep your movements steady and fluid. Do not try to trick your partner, but work together.
- 2. The Machine** This is a group improvisation that puts your imagination to the

test. One person starts the machine by performing a physical action, such as pumping an arm or lifting a knee. Another person joins the first piece of the machine by linking a different physical action to the first. Other actors join in until as many members of the group as possible become part of the machine.

*Variation 1:* Make the machine perform a manufacturing process in which raw materials are turned into a finished product.

*Variation 2:* Add sounds to the actions. Each new action must be accompanied by its own new sound.





## THE GREATS



Robin Williams is a master of improvisation, which he has demonstrated not only in street theater, shown here, but also in his movies. Out of respect for his talent, the directors of such cinema hits as *Good Morning, Vietnam* and *Fern Gully* incorporated Williams's improvisation into the scripts.

## *Improvising Scenes*

As a beginning actor, you can perform successful improvisations by learning some basic techniques. Remember to work out your stage setting carefully, knowing just where the entrances will be. You probably will have nothing more than a table and a few chairs to work around. Use actions to suggest entrances and major props. You may carry small articles you need. In turning the classroom into a street, a ballroom, a theater dressing room, an office, or whatever you choose, you are developing your own imagination along with the imaginations of the rest of the class. They will see whatever you make clear through your explanation and your performance.

Visualize your character in detail, and try to feel his or her emotions. Before you enter, take on the physical attitude of your character as dictated by the character's age, size, and mood. Walk in character as you enter, staying aware of your audience at all times.

## *FROM* THE PROS

"You are ready to begin wherever you are, and you will create new forms, not because they are stylish, but because they will come out of you, and you must find a way to express yourself without permission."

—ALICE CHILDRESS,  
PLAYWRIGHT



A few pieces of furniture may be all the staging you need for improvising a scene. Since improvisation involves fewer props, the ones that are used tend to be more noticeable.

As you practice improvising scenes, you will begin to learn some of the subtleties of acting. You will find that you can stand still without fidgeting and that you can make definite gestures when you feel the need, avoiding the little, aimless ones. When you must move to a chair or toward another person, learn to go straight there without rambling. If you are to pick up an article, actually look at it before you touch it. By observation you will learn that your head usually reacts first (sometimes just your eyes), then your torso, and finally the rest of your body.

### Reminders for Successful Improvisation

- Speak loudly enough to be heard throughout the theater or auditorium.
- Do not hide behind pieces of furniture or other people.
- Move about freely. Try not to stand beside other characters all the time.
- Take plenty of time to speak and to move so that you can create a definite impression.
- Stay in character *all* the time. Listen and speak as your character would in every situation. Always exhibit actions and reactions that are appropriate for your character.



1. Choose a familiar action to perform, and gather whatever simple props you need. In performing this action, there must be a sense of urgency motivating you to perform the action and to complete the task *now*. After completing the action, explain the reason behind the need to rush. Some sample actions are listed below.  
Hemming a skirt  
Photographing a subject  
Changing a bicycle tire  
Applying makeup  
Writing a letter  
Hiding a valuable
2. As you perform the action in exercise 1, a second student comes into the scene. This second student also has an action to perform. Neither of you, however, must be distracted by the other's behavior.
3. Add conversation to the scene. Both of you continue to perform your actions. However, you now talk to each other or mutter to yourselves. Continue to concentrate on the actions in spite of the complication of talking.

## THE MOTIVATED SEQUENCE

Skilled actors mirror people's natural responses to internal or external stimuli—thoughts, actions, or what they hear, see, taste, feel, or smell. The steps in this **motivated sequence** are described below.

### The Motivated Sequence

1. You experience the stimulus.
2. You respond instinctively to the stimulus. (primary response)
3. The idea "connects." Your brain registers the stimulus—this usually takes only a fraction of a second. (idea connection)
4. If the stimulus is the kind that causes a reflex action, you might jerk back your head, or you might make a sound. Your eyes look in that direction. Then your body reacts; your chest moves in the direction of the stimulus. (secondary response)
5. You react vocally and/or physically with your main response.

This whole sequence may be completed in less than a second, but all of the steps must be present if the reaction is to be believable. For example, it is early morning on a school day. You are asleep in bed. The alarm goes off (stimulus). You awaken (primary response); your brain tells you that the alarm is going off (idea connection). You think, "It's

Tuesday—school today!” (idea connection), and you glare at the clock (secondary response). “Yes, it really is 6:00 A.M.” (idea connection). You reach out and shut off the alarm (main response).

If you follow a motivated sequence onstage, your actions will be believable to the audience. When you have a script in your hand, however, you will discover how easy it is to jump to a response without following the sequence. Your audience might not see your performance as believable.

## Exercises

### Motivated Sequence

Apply the motivated sequence to an improvisation of one of the following situations:

1. You are preparing to enjoy a meal in a fine restaurant. As you pick up your fork, you see a fly in your food.
2. The principal enters your classroom and in a serious voice asks you to accompany her to her office.
3. You pick up the morning newspaper and read that a close friend has been selected for a prestigious award.
4. Your history teacher announces a pop quiz on a chapter you have not read.

## ESTABLISHING A CHARACTER

It is very demanding for inexperienced actors to build a character, work out a situation, formulate actions, and create effective dialogue all at the same time. Therefore, if you establish a character beforehand, the words and the action will come much more easily. Ask questions and, if possible, do research to help define your character. You will soon learn that a raised eyebrow, a silent stare, a one-word response, or a groan might convey more information about your character than a dozen sentences.

### Questions to Ask About Your Character

- Who am I?
- What kind of person am I?
- How am I different from the other characters?
- What are the fewest things I can do to convey the most information about my character?
- What does my character want?

Reenact some event, real or imaginary, such as the following:

1. At lunch someone rushes in with news that a spaceship has just landed in a nearby park. Speculate on the ship, its occupants, its origin, and so forth.
2. You are a member of the Roman Senate; Julius Caesar has just been stabbed to death. Recall something Caesar did to you that makes you support or reject the conspirators.
3. After having just been given an engagement ring, announce it to the world—including your former admirers and your fiancé's former admirers.

In your characterization, do not yield to the common impulse to “play the character down.” Shallow characterizations are weak characterizations. Italian playwright Luigi Pirandello said that a person plays a “game of masks” in life, putting on a different mask for each person or occasion faced. Seldom does a person want anyone to see what is really behind the mask. The convincing actor not only lets the audience see the various masks of a character but also allows them to see what is behind the masks, even if only for brief moments. When these glimpses into the character are carefully worked out, the audience sees a well-rounded, thoroughly developed personality.

## CUE

Most directors encourage improvising while the actor is working toward the development of a character. A combination of inner-developed improvisations and suggestions from the director, however, usually results in the best theater.



When improvising strong emotions, an actor must be completely focused. Any wavering or indecision will be perceived by the audience.



## IMPROVISATIONS WITH A PARTNER OR A GROUP

Before you begin working with a partner or a group on an improvised scene, there are a few *dos* and *don'ts* to keep in mind. Following the simple rules in the chart below will free your imagination and keep your improvisation moving.

Do . . .	Don't . . .
<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>Do</b> quickly establish your character in your mind (age, occupation, physical and mental traits, and so on).</li> <li>2. <b>Do</b> identify the problem and your goal by asking what your character wants or needs.</li> <li>3. <b>Do</b> keep focused on meeting your need or goal.</li> <li>4. <b>Do</b> let the situation provide the basis for how your character attempts to reach the goal.</li> <li>5. <b>Do</b> react spontaneously to what is said or done.</li> <li>6. <b>Do</b> see things through the eyes of your character.</li> <li>7. <b>Do</b> listen to and observe what others are saying and doing.</li> <li>8. <b>Do</b> take your cues from your scene partner or partners.</li> <li>9. <b>Do</b> play your scene from moment to moment.</li> <li>10. <b>Do</b> say or do things that demand a definite response.</li> </ol>	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. <b>Don't</b> deny anything your scene partners say about you or the situation. If your partners say you have lovely yellow eyes, accept the statement as true, and use your imagination as you respond.</li> <li>2. <b>Don't</b> ask questions. Questions turn an improvisation into a question-and-answer routine. Especially avoid “terminal questions”—those that can be answered with a <i>yes</i> or a <i>no</i> or with a response that shuts down the flow of the dialogue.</li> <li>3. <b>Don't</b> use simple statements of information. Use descriptive language to make active statements about your feelings, observations, needs, and goals.</li> <li>4. <b>Don't</b> explain situations and feelings. If you are happy, show it. If you are afraid of the dark, show it. Telling is storytelling, not acting. Acting is doing.</li> </ol>



Group improvisations, such as this skit in which Conehead tourists photograph restaurant patrons, require coordination as well as spontaneity.

## Exercises

### Group Improvisations

1. With a partner, act out a scene of your own choosing. You might get ideas from the photographs in this book, newspaper clippings, cartoons, anecdotes from magazines, events in the lives of people you know, or historical and literary sources. Choose any type of scene—comic or sad, fanciful or realistic. Decide on the mood and the general idea you want to convey. Select the character you will play. Each character should have a distinct personality. The greater the difference in age, personality, and type between the characters, the more contrast your scene will contain.
2. Form a group consisting of three females and two males to improvise the following scene:

It is 4:30 P.M. There are five people on an elevator: a film star on her way to a 4:40 audition; a courier delivering an urgent legal brief; a professional athlete who is to be interviewed on the 5:00 P.M. sportscast; a window washer headed

for the twelfth floor to finish the last task of the day before leaving work to catch the 5:12 uptown bus; a thirteen-year-old going to see a parent on the sixth floor. Just as the elevator leaves the third floor where the window washer got on, there is a power failure, stranding the passengers between floors. IMPROVISE!

3. The teacher will assign you and your partner a simple location and a relationship. For example, the relationship could be between brother and sister, and the location could be the family's garage. One person is already in the garage engaged in an activity, such as pumping up a bike tire. That person is in a certain mood. The second person arrives from a specific location and is in a specific mood. Act out your scene, building around your two moods, the relationship, and the location of the present action.

## INDIVIDUAL IMPROVISATIONS

After working with a partner or a group, you might also want to try to develop individual characters in definite situations, reacting to imaginary persons or crowds, or showing particular moods. It is harder to work by yourself than with other people, but by yourself you can take more time to create a personality and to show your character's feelings in more depth. In these improvisations, keep relaxed and have fun. Do not allow yourself to feel embarrassed by the reactions of others.

If you practice all sorts of characterizations on the spur of the moment at home, you will find doing improvisations in class much easier. Feel free to experiment, using motivation as your driving force. Imagination will be the key to characterization, so make every look, every line, and every action count. Try being all sorts of people—Joan of Arc at her trial, a star during a television interview, an Olympic champion after a big event, and so on. Get yourself into all sorts of emotional states, laughing out loud and even crying if you can. With no one around, you will be more relaxed and less inhibited. The practice will show in your classwork because you will be more responsive and sensitive to changing moods and situations. You will find your voice and body becoming more flexible and expressive. Remember: IMPROVISE!

**Individual improvisations, such as the one shown here, allow for greater individual imagination and deeper characterization than group improvisations.**





1. Choose a prop, such as a cane, an umbrella, a fan, a pair of glasses, or a book. After thirty seconds of preparation time before a full-length mirror, present a thirty-second characterization built around the prop you chose. It is recommended that the mirror be located away from the class's view so that you can concentrate alone. While one person performs, another can be preparing.

*Variation:* Use the prop you have chosen for something other than its normal function. Improvise a character using the prop's new function. For example, you could change a cane into a laser beam, a magic wand, or a golf club.

2. Bring a mask to class. It can be a Halloween mask, another commercial mask, or a mask you have made for

yourself. Use the mirror for preparation. Present the character that the mask suggests for thirty seconds. You may then add sounds or speech.

*Variation 1:* Add nonverbal sounds to the improvisation: a grunt, a hum, clearing the throat, or a chuckle.

*Variation 2:* Add words to the action.

3. Individual improvisations provide an excellent opportunity to present monologues. Choose a character and a situation, then decide what or who you want to address in the monologue. Practice in front of a mirror for a few minutes, focusing on conveying emotion and motivation in your voice, facial expressions, and gestures. After you have refined your monologue, present it to the class.

## Application ACTIVITIES

The following suggestions for improvisations provide a step-by-step progression from simple emotional responses to the improvised writing of a play.

### Emotional Responses

1. React to the following sentences with one gesture or bodily stance.

Your face is red!  
You have pretty eyes.  
I love you.

Do you always look like that?  
I think you're frightened.  
You're standing on my toe.

(continued)

## Application

### ACTIVITIES (continued)

2. Your teacher will place different items in individual paper sacks and distribute the sacks to the class. In turn, reach into your sack, feel the object that is in it, say “one thousand one” silently, and then convey your reaction to the item by a facial expression and one sentence. The following list contains possible items to be placed in the sacks.

sandpaper	cold cream	raisins
cooked spaghetti	feathers	knitting yarn
a cotton ball	a flower petal	cracker crumbs
rough tree bark	a piece of lettuce	a marble
a pickle	crumpled cellophane	

3. Express the following feelings with a facial response, and then combine the facial response with a bodily reaction. Try to recall a personal experience that caused you to experience these feelings. One to five participants may do this exercise at a time. Compare the responses. What are their similarities and differences?

love	greed	embarrassment	shock
hope	jealousy	understanding	sympathy
fear	joy	anger	patience
bitterness	rebuke	disbelief	fickleness
doubt	happiness	pleading	courage
longing	grief	sadness	surprise

### Vocal Responses

1. Make up a list of statements similar to the examples below. Exchange lists with a classmate, and react to one statement as five different people.

STATEMENT	“I don’t like asparagus!”
RESPOND AS	Your parent, your doctor, your server, your host, your child

STATEMENT	“I’ve been asked to the prom!”
RESPOND AS	Your best friend, a jealous rival, the teacher whose class you have interrupted, your father, your sister

(continued)

## Application

### ACTIVITIES (continued)

2. Two to five persons will begin improvising a scene based on a simple situation. Either your teacher or a member of your class will act as the director. As the scene develops, the director will call out an emotion to the performer who is speaking at that moment. That person must immediately assume the emotion mentioned.
3. This is a two-person activity that develops a sense of conflict within a scene. Each person wants to fulfill a specific objective. One person might want the other's shoe, while the other person might want to leave the room. The object of the improvisation is to get what you want without asking for it.
4. Line up side by side with two friends—A-B-C. The person in the center (B) begins telling about something strange that happened recently. The person on the right (A) interrupts and begins a conversation with B. A few seconds later, C starts a conversation with B while A continues talking. B must try to maintain both conversations.

### Scripts

1. As you develop scripts for the following situations, make sure you include dialogue that sets up the action and advances the plot. You must also pay attention to the characters' emotions and motivations.
  - Two salesclerks are discussing a department manager they dislike. The manager appears and accuses one of them of having stolen a necklace that has disappeared.
  - A father meets his teenage daughter at midnight on her return from a party that ended at 10:30 P.M. Show what happens.
2. People from varied walks of life are sometimes thrown together by chance. Work out your characters, reactions, and a conclusion for each of these situations:
  - People in a boat or in an aircraft that is having engine trouble
  - People in a traffic jam or on a subway train during a power failure

### Creating the Improvised Play

In groups of five to eight persons, work out a script that can be made into a simple, improvised play. Decide on the theme of the play, the characters, their motivations, and the basic conflicts. After improvising the script several times to establish some actions, dialogue, and workable scenes, fill in the outline until you have a skeletal script. Improvise two or three more times, and you will be able to produce a written script.





## CHAPTER

# 1

# REVIEW

### Summary and Key Ideas

Summarize the chapter by answering the following questions.

1. What is improvisation?
2. What is “the illusion of the first time”? Why is it sometimes difficult to capture?
3. Why is to “do nothing” effectively a challenge? What is the connection between this challenge and scene-stealing?
4. Identify the two basic approaches to telling a story. Explain each.
5. List the steps of the motivated sequence.
6. What are some questions to ask when establishing a character?
7. What are some essential things to keep in mind as you improvise?

### Discussing Ideas

1. Discuss how character is conveyed through voice, body language, and movement. Is one of these methods more effective than the others?
2. Discuss the role that imagination plays in improvisation.
3. Discuss the difference between experiencing an emotion and portraying an emotion.
4. Discuss the benefits and drawbacks of the improvised approach to acting. Discuss how a combination of this approach with suggestions from a director might result in a better performance.

### FOCUS ON

### Scripts

#### Why should acting students try their hand at scriptwriting?

The answer is simple: Going through the process of creating a script is a great way to learn about dramatic structure. When you work to present exposition, plot, characters, and theme in your own way, you move to a higher level of thinking. Scriptwriting will help you to become a wiser reader—and it may lead you to discover new powers of communication as an actor.

**Creating a Script** Outline and create a short script about a situation of your choice. Your script should be easily adaptable for theater, film, or television. Make sure to

include motivated characters, unique dialogue, and convincing conflict and resolution. For help with the scriptwriting process, see the Reference Section. When you’re finished, exchange scripts with a partner.

**Analyzing Scripts** Locate scripts for a stage play, a television show, and a movie. Compare and contrast the three scripts. Then write a short report answering these questions: What conventions, or practices, do all three forms seem to share? What conventions differ? What similarities and differences do you see in the scripts’ dramatic structure?

# REVIEW WORKSHOP

## IMPROVISATION

### INDEPENDENT ACTIVITIES

**Using a Prop** Choose an unusual object, such as an old toy, a photograph album, a microscope, or a small kitchen appliance. Spend four or five minutes thinking about how this object came to be the prized possession of a particular person. Present a three-minute monologue about the object, revealing your character's emotional attachment to it.

**Masking Physical Irritation** You have just been introduced to an important person, such as the President of the United States, your future employer, or the director of admissions at the college you want to attend. Unfortunately, just at the moment of introduction, you experience a physical irritation, such as a runny nose, a piece of food caught between your teeth, an itchy mosquito bite, or a collar that is too tight. Improvise your part of the conversation while trying to remedy the physical irritation unobtrusively.



### Cooperative Learning Activity

**Conflict and  
Fantasy** With a  
partner, choose  
one of the imagi-

nary situations below. Plan the conflict and its resolution, but do not discuss the characterization of the people involved. Then improvise the scene.

After discussing character motivation, repeat the scene. Then discuss these questions: What types of characters were portrayed? How did the characters change? Which scene was more effective?

- A genie grants ten wishes to a person who would prefer to have only two.
- An impostor impersonates a dentist, a ballet instructor, or a museum guide.

### Across the CURRICULUM Activity

**Art** Choose a painting, such as Edward Hopper's *Soir Bleu*, Sandro Botticelli's *La Primavera*, or Edgar Degas's *The Rehearsal*. By yourself, with a partner, or with a small group, visualize the situation and the emotional context that prompted the painting. Improvise character roles (you may include the painter or one of the subjects in the painting), and present your "picture window" for the class. Show the class a picture of the painting so that they can visualize your role better.