

LD
4330
2007
.H37

Taking Center Stage



**Theatre Activities
for use within the
Long Term
Care Continuum**

By Elizabeth A. Harper

*In partial fulfillment
of the Master of Arts
In Interdisciplinary Studies
Summer 2006*

LD
4330
2007
H37

Taking Center Stage



**Theatre Activities
for use within the
Long Term
Care Continuum**

By Elizabeth A. Harper

*In partial fulfillment
of the Master of Arts
In Interdisciplinary Studies
Summer 2006*

Theatre Activities

Improvisational Activities For Use Within the Long Term Care Continuum

This booklet is a guide for activity professionals within the long term care continuum to utilize and adapt according to resident ability, interest, and cognition. Most of these games are as simple to play as charades and can be useful tools to encourage communication and connection. The following improvisations are based upon some of the ideas of Viola Spolin, theatre practitioner, but have been changed to accommodate disabilities and cognitive deficits. They can be further altered to suit the needs of specific players and groups. The unique form and wording of the following activities are original. The improvisational games and exercises are intended to be fun and creative.

Enjoy! -E. Harper

Viola Spolin, who wrote her book *"Theatre Games for the Lone Actor: A Handbook"* (2001) at the mature age of 80, defined improvisation as:

"Playing the game; setting out to solve the problem with no preconception about how you will do it; permitting everything in the environment (animate or inanimate) to work for you in solving the problem. It is not the scene, it is the way to a scene; a predominant function of the intuitive. Playing the game brings opportunity to learn theatre to a cross section of people." (Spolin, p.160)

The intriguing thing about this statement is the term 'intuition'. For Spolin, intuition, was the "x-area" that allows actors/participants to be in the moment and to connect with that moment through "learning theatre". (p. 160)

Viola Spolin believed that theatrical engagement was so valuable that she devoted her entire life to the 'game' of playing. This dedication is rare today. Her son, Paul Sills would go on to be a founding director of Chicago's Second City, where he worked with such notables as Gilda Radner, John Belushi and Steve Martin. (Libera, 2004) This booklet is dedicated to all of the innovative individuals who, like Viola Spolin, believe in engagement, communication, and playing.

Improvisational exercises can be done with any number of participants. Spolin believed that 'techniques of theater are the techniques of communication.' (2004, p. 14) The practice of drawing a player into engagement is communicative action at its best. Theatre games do not necessarily have any set guidelines other than what you assign to the exercise.

As the facilitator, you may utilize the Spolin technique of *side-coaching*. Side-coaching is basically the attempt to encourage and to move the player further into the scene or to extrapolate more emotion, action or movement. (Spolin, 2004)

For example: Perhaps one of the participants is wearing a hat. This hat may hold a story. If the facilitator were to ask, "*Emma, where did you find that extraordinary hat?*" The participant may reply: "*My hat, ohh, this ol' thing? Why, this hat belonged to my mother*". The facilitator may then have to coax her a bit and ask, "*It looks very good on you with your lovely blue eyes. Did your mother have many hats?*"
"*Oh yes, my mother had three hats that I can recall. But this was my favorite hat, as a child I used to marvel over the silk flowers and yes; this hat belonged to my mother. She wore this hat to church every Sunday.*"

Further information could be gleaned from this encounter by asking questions of the participant.

- *Did this church have stained glass windows?*
- *What were the stained glass windows like?*
- *Were the sermons riveting?*
- *What did the preacher/pastor/rabbi look like? What tone of voice did he/she have?*
- *Was he/she a good speaker?*
- *Did the church hold many attendees?*
- *Can you show us through a dramatic scene how a particular parishioner spoke or looked?*
- *Do you remember a story about this person?*

These questions may solicit the following response. . .

. . . our church had a large congregation; it was always filled to the brim with parishioners who sang gospel music during church service. After the service, the parishioners would meet in the church kitchen and feast upon sweet potato pie, and my mother would always ask me to watch her hat so she wouldn't misplace it. I used to like that job. . .

As you can see, the wearing of a hat can bring a story with it and this story can be as intricate or simple as the participant deems appropriate to his or her recollection.

VOCAL EXERCISES

Perhaps a large group is gathered at a Senior center. Some individuals are marginalized by disability and other individuals are high functioning. You want to bring forth a scenario that includes each participant.

For example: *Try devising a context that is easy to relate to. Form the group into a semicircle, with the participants sitting with enough room to stretch their arms to the sides and enough room to stretch their legs forward. The facilitator states that this exercise will be delivered in an alphabetical manner. Choose the first participant, usually the end person. Give them the letter A.*

Give the following scene:

*I am traveling by train to the Antarctica
my berth is filled with apples and alpacas
After stopping in Anchorage I will. . .
Arrange to alter my attitude*

or

*I am traveling on a ship to Argentina
My ship is full of Apples
I am bringing my accordion.
And there I will entertain alligators*

Continue on with the alphabet and coach the players to get as outrageous as they are comfortable with. Then move to the next participant who utilizes the letter "B", then the next letter, and so forth. There are many ways that this exercise can be done based solely on your own whimsy and the mood and abilities of the players.

This activity is meant for those without vocal impairments.

REPEAT AFTER ME

These tongue twisters are challenging, but so much fun! A variety of sounds are utilized in this "repeat after me" sequence. Try having the participants make up some of their own rhythmic tongue twisters to add to your repertoire.

- *Archaic archetypes arranged antiques*
- *Bold bombardiers browsed Bombay*
- *Curious cacophony created confusion*
- *Delicious delectable delighted Delilah.*
- *Euphoric elocutionists elated elephants*
- *Frumpy fairies fought ferociously*
- *Gorgeous guys gorged on guavas*
- *Hungry hippos haunted Horatio's home*
- *Irish iguanas itched Icarus*
- *Japanese jailors jumped jealous jaguars*
- *Kangaroos kicked koalas kindly*

been slipping his hand through the bars and stealing the food items.

The participants decide who notices the monkey and at what point in the scene they discover it and also what they decide to do about it (i.e., go get the zookeeper to replace the lunch, or throw the other lunch in the cage as well!)

Two individuals smell some perfumes at a boutique, one likes floral, the other appreciates musk.

How do you tell your best friend they have no sense of smell?

Two individuals are trying to communicate with one another but they speak different languages.

For example: there is an emergency, someone is having a baby, the bus is coming, there is a live concert in the park. .

(The specific language can be made up or use Spanish, French, etc.)

Two individuals are trying to teach each other how to bake a cake in gibberish. Ask the players to physically create the imagery of the flour as it may create a cloud of white, or to taste the batter. Have the players show us whether the butter they are stirring in the cake is hard or soft. Does the batter taste good or bad? Is the cake chocolate or vanilla?

(The exercises above can be altered to allow for more participants)

Improvisation exercises for one individual

One individual provides a scenario for the other participants to view and guess what action is occurring. This activity is very similar to charades, although it offers more creative development as it includes scenarios rather than interpretation of words or phrases. The activity can be written on a sheet of paper and provided for the participants or it can be random and at the whim of the participant. Some examples of what these scenes can consist of are as follow:

An artist prepares a canvas for painting

The artist comes into the room with a large shirt or apron which the player demonstrates, one sleeve at a time. Next, the artist obtains a palette. The artist adds the paint. As the artist unscrews the tube of paint and puts the paint on the palette, a mental image is expressed. This can be done slowly or quickly, depending on the mood of the player. Suggest that the participants remember acts as they occur and later discuss the sequence of events. This affords the player with cognitive and visual recognition.

A florist prepares an arrangement

Ask the following questions of the players as they prepare to begin this activity. What visual activity will you utilize to demonstrate the activity? Will the flowers be long stemmed or short? When you smell the flower will it have an aroma? Do the flowers have thorns? Demonstrate the flowers having thorns. Demonstrate the flower not having a scent. Can you show how disappointed you may be at this lack of scent? Or can you demonstrate with body language how this scent affects you?

Discuss the potential for the scene

Make certain to watch the actor carefully as some of the players will have marginalized movements and capabilities. You may need to ask the players about their reactions, movements and gestures to ensure understanding and to afford the player with recognition and also respect for their craft.

PLAYERS AS SIDE-COACHES

Ask the participants to become *side-coaches* and direct other players in a scene. They can decide

what the scene is and how it is to be played. They can also just direct the players to do various physical actions. This can be extremely engaging and very funny for the players. *None of the players need to do anything that they would feel uncomfortable with either mentally or physically. Make sure to establish the criteria before the activity takes place.*

GIVE AND TAKE

One player gives the other player an object. This object can be any form or shape. The receiving player determines what the item is and thanks the other for giving them, *a ladybug, an alarm clock, a breadbox*, etc. The receiving player shows the shape of the object with their hand gestures, (heavy objects would weigh the hands down, etc)

The receiving player then becomes the giver and the activity continues until all players have gone.

PHYSICAL EXERCISE WITH IMPROV

Use arms and legs only - No sound

This activity can be utilized with individuals of all abilities. Have the players sit in a large circle. Ask them take turns demonstrating the following using gestures (*no sound*)

- *A particular sport-baseball, football, baseball, hockey*
- *A police officer, construction worker, fishmonger*
- *A type of animal-horse, pig, bird, monkey*

Facial Expressions Only

(Can be used with participants with disabilities of hands or arms, or visual or speaking impairments)

- Ask the players to utilize facial expression
 - to demonstrate a particular emotion. (*happy, sad, anxious, nervous, agitated, itchy, stubborn, etc.*)
To indicate a particular action, (*winking, smelling a flower, a roaring animal, eating an ice cream, a sour candy, etc.*)

MEMORY BOX

This cognitive exercise is to be used with individuals who do not have visual or speech impairments.

Take a box full of items and have each player look at it for a set period of time. Ask them to mentally record the objects, write them down, and then repeat what they remember to the group. This can be challenging but exercises the mind and provides memory enhancement.

Next, place new objects in the memory box and ask the players to memorize the items in order. Then provide paper and pencil for them to draw the items that they saw in the position they were in. This allows the player to utilize another tactile skill as well as utilize their cognitive memory skills.

BUTTON BOX

This is a relatively easy activity for all levels of disability or cognition. However, visual deficits may be a problem for some; those individuals may simply feel the button and describe it in the context of the game.

Have participants look at a box of buttons and pick out a few. Each button has a particular history about it. Have the players describe the following factors of interest:

What kind of outfit did this button belong to?

What was the fabric like? Soft, wool, silk?
Who wore the garment that this button was on?
Was the person male or female?
How old were they?
Where did they live?

This exercise can be as long or as short as the facilitator deems appropriate.

BAKERY

One or more participants work in a bakery

A player comes to the bakery to pick up a cake
The baker is extremely slow to answer questions
(he/she may move laconically or extremely fast)

The participants can decide how to solve the situation and how to react to situational problems.

Two individuals work as the baker and patron, and the other participants are advisors who help set the scene and provide solutions.

PHOTOVISION

Show a photo to the group
Have volunteers who wish to establish a scene using the photo to explore concepts, ideas, characterizations and events
The facilitator can guide the participants explore a time, place, and a scenario. The photo can be of anything whatsoever the imagination of the participants will take it where the scene needs to go. The facilitator can offer direction, guidance and ask questions if there is difficulty in finding a specific scene.

MAGIC SUITCASE

Place a variety of items in a suitcase or bag
(either a large or very small bag)
Utilize things that are unusual or oddly shaped, colorful or things from nature
Have each participant take an item out of the box and describe its' function.

The item may be something entirely different than what it is usually used for. E.g. . . . *You may think this is an ordinary dice, but it is a secret coded device that is used for time travel. If the dice is rolled and lands upon a six then all of the people who are aged six or up will get to travel aboard a rocket ship to Venus, they can only do this when the moon is full and in its 6th lunar month . . .*

HIGH TEA

Provide the participants with a box of accessories or costumes to dress in for a London-like High Tea. (this can include gloves, handkerchiefs, hats, lace collars) Bring in tea and all of the accoutrements necessary for a tea party, such as a tea set, cloth napkins, either make or buy small little cakes or treats, (diabetic considerations?) Then have each participant adopt the characters that they would think would be at a high tea. Discuss options with the participants and run with the most interesting dialogue and scenes they present. The scene will naturally flow, but the facilitator can assist as needed to guide the participants through the scene.

CONCLUSIONS

Now that you have been given some exercises to assist you in establishing your own activity program, here are some valuable bits of key information that will assist you in setting up your very own theatre activity program.

- **Utilize outside assistants from high school, community college or university settings.**

Establish relationships with gerontology, theatre and communication educators and utilize their knowledge to assist you in the development of your theatre activity program, and to provide you with a network of volunteers.

- **Utilize other staff to assist you**

They may share in the benefits of theatre as they watch residents, staff and volunteers, enjoy themselves in new ways.

- **Make sure to educate fellow staff members about the importance of theatre and the value of communication and interconnectivity within the nursing home environment.**

Encourage the residents to participate by advertising the program, giving the players valuable side-coaching and empower them to think creatively in a safe environment.

Urge the players to form relationships with others through communication and through creative planning.

To create an environment that looks like a real set for those small productions you may wish to invite guests to, you can set up a small space that looks similar to a real theatre. This can be accomplished very easily and may require only a small expense. By using lighting in a semi-darkened room, you may receive some lighting benefits that will set the mood. Put one light in the center of your stage area, (downstage center) and one on either side of the stage area (in a triangular fashion).

Sometimes you can even use lighting to highlight someone as they give a soliloquy, or speech to the audience. For items for your props collection, go to your local thrift store, garage sale, (or advertise that you are taking donations for your soon-to-be theatre group). Find various objects that are inexpensive and have one of the players, who are higher functioning, assist you in setting up a props area. Here are some suggestions for what props you may need to start your theatre company.

PROPS LIST

Old Hats, caps, scarves
Handkerchiefs
Gloves
Old suspenders
Tea set
Tablecloths, napkins, doilies
Button Box
Magic Wooden Box with various artifacts
Drawing Paper
Pencils
Paints
Large paper/preferably on roll
Paints/Paintbrushes
Clip lights on poles (3)
(these lights can be metal clip lights found at a hardware store, clipped to a standing floor lamp)

You can prepare a stage area by simply hanging up paper in front of a table and taping it to the sides of the table. Or you can fashion inexpensive screens to block off an area. These can be made with fabric inlays or with paper. You may paint these screens or utilize large ream paper that can be painted in any way you wish to indicate an outdoor scene at the zoo, etc.

Thank you for your interest in developing your activity program with the provision of theatre!

Bibliography

Libera, A. (2004) The Second City

Almanac of Improvisation.

Illinois: Northwestern University Press

Spolin, V. (2001) Theater Games for the Lone

Actor. Paul and Carol Sills (eds.)

Illinois: Northwestern University Press

© Elizabeth A. Harper 2006