

ACTING EXERCISES I: IMPROVS

The acting exercises in this document suggest that all acting takes place between two people, but of course it's equally likely that an actor acts alone or in a large group.

Allowing for this range would produce unreadable English, so I have treated the duo as the standard. The improv theater games that follow are terrific for building skills, and each is described by purpose, activity, and discussion. Sometimes they incorporate a degree of premeditated structure, and sometimes the actor has no prior guidelines. Some exercises also make useful tools when actors get hung up during rehearsal or shooting.

IMPROVISATION EXERCISES

In alphabetical order, the main acting principles explored by the improvisation (IMP) exercises are as follows:

DESCRIPTION	Improv Ex #
Action during conversation—maintaining both while developing action	IMP-6
Actions from thoughts—interior monologues direct actions in blind date	IMP-18
Adaptation—responding to fellow actor without anticipating or lagging	IMP-1
Body acting—speaking gibberish and using body to communicate meaning	IMP-19
Character, inventing—via actions and words show who/what/when/where	IMP-5
Communal improv—actors improv favorite TV programs at short notice	IMP-16
Communal improv—actors improv scene from bad genre movie	IMP-17
Communion—closely observing another in order to mirror him/her	IMP-1
Communion—playing a part amid a whole group	IMP-8
Emotion, developing—actors improv scene toward target emotion	IMP-9
Emotion, hiding—character projecting opposite of true interior state	IMP-10
Emotion, sublimating—two mismatched people work together anyway	IMP-20
Emotions, bridging—two actors start in one emotion, transition to another	IMP-15
Focus—actors avoid self-consciousness by maintaining focus	IMP-11

Givens—improvising a character from who/what/when/where	IMP-2
Hiding tension—two characters carry out task during nonverbal tension	IMP-4
Imagination—summoning imagination lets actors play an appliance	IMP-12
Individual in ensemble—playing a part, contributing to group dynamic	IMP-8
Inner life—maintain everyday actions and convey inner state	IMP-3
Interior monologue—dissenting, mismatched workmates try to cooperate	IMP-20
Portrayal—character quizzed by audience reveals full dimension	IMP-7
Subtext—maintain tensions during surface life yet communicate a subtext	IMP-3
Tactile defensiveness—permit bodily contact because you are falling	IMP-14
Trust—dealing with blind dependency on partner	IMP-13
Trust—depending on partner to catch one when falling	IMP-14

Exercise IMP-1: Mirror Images

Purpose Close observation and moment-to-moment adaptation without anticipating.

Activity You arrive at the bathroom mirror, come close to its surface, and go through your morning routine. Your partner is your image in the mirror, doing everything you do but inverted as a mirror image inverts. Swap roles after a few minutes.

Discussion

1. How successful was the mirror at replicating the actions, without anticipating or lagging?
2. Did the person and image each stay in character?
3. How frank and complete was the person's routine? Who took risks and was therefore self-revealing?

Exercise IMP-2: Who, What, When, and Where?

Purpose Immediate character and situation development from givens and without props.

Activity Instructor designates an actor, then asks successive people to supply a who, what, when, and where. The actor then carries out some appropriate action, in

character, for a minute or two. The instructor calls “Cut!” when the action is long enough or if development levels off. The class reports what it saw happening and what was communicated. The actor then says briefly what he or she intended.

Example:

Who [is present]? Mary Jo Sorensen, 35

Where [is she]? In an airport lounge

When [is this]? Christmas Eve, late at night

What [is happening]? She is waiting for her parents and must tell them she has lost her job.

Discussion

1. What seemed to be going on inside the character?
2. What was convincing, and what sounded false notes?
3. What intentions did not come across as natural?
4. Did the actor carry out all of the assignment?
5. Did he or she remember to interact with the environment?
6. Was there a significant change or development?

Note: From this exercise onward, each class member can vote by silently raising their hands. The director stops the piece when enough of the audience thinks the dramatic development is past its peak.

Exercise IMP-3: Solo, No Words

Purpose Use unremarkable, everyday action to communicate something of the inner thoughts and feelings of a character whose life is quite unlike that of the actor.

Activity From an action (the *what*) and using no props, invent a *who*, *where*, and *when* to sustain your character sketch for three minutes. An actor must be able to carry out everyday actions and make them interesting, so avoid storytelling or high drama.

Suggestions

- Alone in someone's house (whose?), where you explore: (a) the refrigerator, (b) the owner's bedroom
- Unwrapping a long-awaited parcel
- Waiting in the dentist's office

- Trying on a new article of clothing
- Taking medicine
- Wrapping a gift
- Cleaning shoes
- Watching something (what?) out the window
- Finding a box of your childhood toys you haven't seen for many years
- Overhearing an interesting conversation in a store
- Caring for a pet
- Taking a bike out after the winter
- Cleaning out your parents' attic
- Waiting for a phone call
- Dividing up the laundry
- Watching a sport

Discussion

1. In a particular performance, what was interesting, and what did it make you see?
2. Could you see not only the character, but also the environment?
3. When did the player break focus and why?

Exercise IMP-4: Duo, No Words

Purpose To communicate through interaction something of the inner thoughts and feelings of two characters, using an everyday action that involves some element of conflict.

Activity From an action (the *what*) and using no props, invent a *who*, *where*, and *when* to sustain your character sketch. Avoid storytelling or high drama and use action with minimal or no dialogue. Try these:

- Handing a newborn baby to the mother and back again
- Playing pinball
- Making a double bed
- Putting up a tent
- Buying a forbidden magazine
- Photographing a model

- Maneuvering heavy furniture through a doorway
- Washing the best dishes after a special meal
- Carrying a heavy garbage bag
- Washing a child's hair
- Pulling a sliver out of a finger
- Watching a TV show: one likes it; the other doesn't
- Waiting in a doorway for a heavy rainstorm to ease
- Inspecting car damage after a fender bender

Discussion Did the actors create:

1. Two distinct character identities (*who*)?
2. A believable and recognizable environment—country, area, city, place, or room—and use it (*where*)?
3. A distinctive period and time of day (*when*)?
4. A believable tension?
5. A situation in which speech was not called for?
6. An interaction in which neither was controlling the overall movement of the sketch?
7. Did you see communion and adaptation?

Exercise IMP-5: Solo, with Words

Purpose To create a character, employing *who*, *where*, *when*, and *what*, and using both actions and speech.

Activity In creating your character, remember to develop him or her through actions.

Do not sit still and rely on a monologue. Here are some suggestions:

- A difficult phone conversation (maybe with a weak cellular signal)
- Reconstructing a painful conversation
- Writing the opening remarks of an important speech
- Rehearsing in front of the bathroom mirror for a traffic court appearance
- Getting ready to tell someone of your betrayal or infidelity
- Working up to approaching your boss for a raise

- Rehearsing the way you will evict a needy relative who came for a short visit and has long overstayed
- Explaining to your employer why you must start a new job in a gorilla costume
- Your head is stuck between the railings enclosing a war memorial. Someone has gone to call the fire department, and you are trying to figure out an explanation
- A practical joke has misfired, and you must calm the irate victim

Discussion Did the actor:

1. Create a believable character?
2. Keep up a developing action?
3. Make the situation develop?
4. Make you see all the physical objects and surroundings?

Exercise IMP-6: Duo, with Words

Purpose To maintain conversation and a developing action at the same time.

Activity Each of these sketches requires both a conversation and accompanying physical action, which should be purposeful. Do not take it too fast, and don't feel you must keep talking all the time. Examples to try:

- Demonstrating a kitchen appliance to a family member
- Washing the best dishes after a special meal
- Eating a meal and discussing a prearranged topic
- Asking for some money that you are owed
- Maneuvering heavy furniture through a doorway
- Showing someone they have not done a good job
- Discussing your son's or daughter's rotten grades
- Teaching a friend to drive
- Asking for something embarrassing from a pharmacist
- Teaching someone a dance step

Discussion Did they:

1. Keep both topic and actions going?
2. Keep the physical world they created consistent?
3. Listen to and work off each other?

4. Share the initiative equally?
5. Allow the piece to develop spontaneously?
6. Develop interesting characters?

Exercise IMP-7: Make Your Own Character

Purpose To place the actor, as a character, in the hands of the audience.

Activity Go before the class, in an item or two of costume, as a character based on someone you know who made a powerful impression on you. The class finds out about you by asking questions that probe your identity and values, to which you answer in character. Each character should be onstage for about 10 minutes, and two or three performances per session is the maximum—the interaction can be very intense.

Discussion Undertaken sincerely, this exercise can be really magical, a powerful exercise in portrayal that tells much about the actor's values and influences. There may be little need for discussion if the exercise goes well. Play it by ear.

Exercise IMP-8: Ensemble Situations

Purpose To engage the whole group in a collective creation.

Activity In these situations individual characters contribute to a whole. The where and when must be agreed on beforehand. The aim is to keep up your character while contributing to the development of the piece. Sample situations:

- A tug-of-war
- Dealing with an obstreperous drunk
- Someone is hurt in the street
- A person faints in a crowded train
- Surprise party
- Party is interrupted by protesting neighbor
- Bus driver stops bus because a passenger refuses to pay
- Airline clerk announces delay to irate passengers
- Lone cop tries to arrest person at demonstration; crowd argues
- Teacher tries to calm down classroom of first graders

Discussion

1. How many subordinate actions were going on during the main action?
2. Did everyone stay in character? (The temptation is to lose focus unless you are important.)
3. How did the piece develop?
4. What compromises did people make to sustain the whole?

Exercise IMP-9: Developing an Emotion

Purpose Two or more actors are asked to improvise a scene culminating in a given emotion in one or more of the characters.

Activity Try this exercise only after the class has developed considerable rapport and experience. The players must invent characters and a situation, then develop it to the point where the specified emotion is reached. The class can stop the sketch when the emotion is reached or if the piece is not going anywhere. Emotions one character might feel include Anger, Suspicion, Sympathy, Relief, Jealousy, Contdescension, Rejection, Love, Regret, Disbelief, Friendliness, Release, Superiority, Inferiority, Empathy.

Discussion This asks that actors build to a known conclusion, and it's very tempting to escape by manipulating the situation. All the prior criteria apply, but important considerations here are:

1. Was the interaction credible?
2. Did it arrive at the specified emotion?
3. If not, why not?
4. Was the development even or uneven?
5. Was the initiative shared equally?

Exercise IMP-10: Inner Conflict

This exercise was inspired by Richard Nixon's famous "I am not a crook" speech.

Purpose To portray a character's contradictory tensions, but never directly reveal them.

Activity The character is anyone prominent in the news who wishes to be correctly understood. He or she begins with the sentence, “Because I think you may have the wrong idea about me, I’m going to tell you what most people don’t know.” After the character has spoken for a while, the audience, playing journalists, ask pointed questions.

Discussion

1. When was the character sincere? When was he or she contrived?
2. When was he/she suppressing the truth?
3. How did you know?
4. What was interesting? What was less so?

Exercise IMP-11: See or be Seen

Purpose Explore the idea of focus as an antidote to self-consciousness. This exercise lets everyone experience just how disturbing it is to have someone watching you when your mind is susceptible to self-consciousness.

Activity Half the class is the audience and remains seated. The other half, the performers, stand in a row facing the audience looking above their heads. Audience members carefully study the faces and body language of the performers.

- The instructor tells the performers to empty their minds and concentrate on simply being themselves.
- After a minute or two, the instructor tells the performers to mentally visualize a room they know well and everything in it.
- After another minute or two, the instructor tells the audience and performers to switch roles and repeats Steps 1 and 2 with the other half of the class.

Discussion

1. Performers: How did it feel to focus on “being yourself”?
2. Audience: How did the performers’ feelings show in their behavior and appearance?
3. Audience: What did you see when the performers switched from “being themselves” to visualizing?
4. Performers: What kinds of work can an actor legitimately undertake to avoid feeling self-conscious?

Exercise IMP-12: Domestic Appliance

Purpose To become in spirit something you are not.

Activity Study a domestic appliance in its full range of action. In class, announce what you have been assigned to do, then give a full impersonation using your whole body and vocalized sound effects. Try to convey the appliance's spirit as well as its shape, actions, and sounds. The class should choose something for the instructor, who breaks the ice by going first (more than once, I have been asked to become a flushing toilet). It is quite normal to feel foolish and painfully self-conscious. Use what you learned from Exercise IMP-1 to maintain focus.

Examples that can be assigned:

Drip Coffee maker	Washing machine	Garbage disposal
Over-filled garbage bag removed	Upright vacuum cleaner	Rusty door lock
Toilet flushing	Toothbrush at work	Steam iron
Cold car engine that will not start	Electric toaster	Photocopier
Electric can opener	Cell phone on vibrate	Clock radio coming on
Can of beer opening	Honey pouring	Dripping faucet
Rubber plunger opening drain	Corkscrew	Knife chopping onions

Discussion

1. When and why was the actor self-conscious?
2. Where in his or her body could you locate tension from self-consciousness?
3. Did he or she get into focus, and if so, when?
4. Which part of the impersonation made you see the real thing?

Exercise IMP-13: Flying Blind

Purpose Exploring trust and choosing to be dependent.

Activity The rehearsal space is made into a disordered jumble of obstacles. Divide into pairs. One person is blindfolded and disoriented by spinning him several times.

He now walks as fast as he dares—with his partner not touching him but whispering instructions on which way to move. As a variation, the seeing partner can guide through touch. After a few minutes, switch roles on the instructor's command.

Discussion

1. Actor: How did it feel to be so utterly dependent on another person?
2. Who mostly took the initiative?
3. Instructor/audience: What did body language tell you about different people's reactions to dependency?

Exercise IMP-14: “Timber!”

Purpose Explore trust, equal partnership, and tactile defensiveness.

Activity Using pairs (same sex or different), one person is a piece of timber, and the other must try to balance the timber upright. You can use any part of your body—*but not your hands*—to catch and steady the falling timber. After a few minutes, swap roles on command. In any acting situation, each must share control equally, being ready to “catch” a partner or be caught, yet neither taking more than momentary initiative. Neither player should fall into a habitually dominant or a submissive acting relationship. This is good for breaking habitual boundaries since actors must be able to make physical contact—and even play love scenes—with people they may neither know nor find attractive.

Discussion

1. What were your thoughts and feelings, being in bodily contact with someone you do not know well?
2. How free and true to gravity was the timber? (How much did he or she protect the two of you by making it easier?)
3. How willing was the timber: To trust you to catch him or her? To fall backward and stay rigid?
4. Did one partner tend to control the situation?

Exercise IMP-15: Bridging Emotions

Purpose To make a credible change from one emotion to another.

Activity Same as Exercise IMP-14, except that the players start in the middle of one emotion and find their way to the next. Start with two emotions, and then, if you want to make it truly challenging, specify three.

Discussion Same as Exercise IMP-14

Exercise IMP-16: Surfing the Channels

Purpose To involve a group in immediate and unpremeditated invention.

Activity Divide the class into players and audience. The audience is watching a TV program; the players are actors in TV shows. When the designated situation (“facing death,” say) is running out of steam, an audience member may seize the “remote” and “change the channel,” announcing what the new program is. The players must now develop “facing death” in the new program format, until someone changes the channel again. After a while, students swap roles. Suggested situations:

- Persuasion
- Confronting authority
- Trapped
- Avoiding commitment
- Returning home
- A life-changing interview
- Facing death
- Cheating on a friend

Discussion

1. What inventiveness did you see in the players?
2. How authentic were the situations compared to actual TV programs?
3. How quickly were the players and the audience able to make the change?
4. How equally were roles distributed?
5. Did some actors fall into controlling or passive roles?

Exercise IMP-17: The Discount DVD Bin

Purpose Same as Exercise IMP-16.

Activity Same ideas as Exercise IMP-16, except that the situation is an electronics super store that is going out of business. In one aisle they have a huge bin of unsold DVDs being sold at \$5.99 each. Every type of DVD imaginable is heaped into this bin, but they are mostly third-rate, and full of genre clichés. When the audience votes to see a new sample, the director calls out the title of the new DVD:

- 1950s comedies
- Slasher films
- Do-it-yourself kitchen rehab
- Nature films
- Classic TV Cartoon Shows
- Self-help and Motivation
- Teen romances
- Travel and Food

Discussion Similar to Exercise IMP-16. Accent is on spontaneity and speed of adaptation. Did the cast contribute equally?

Exercise IMP-18: Blind Date

Purpose To work with interior monologue. This exercise takes great concentration from all concerned but is a lot of fun. It shows what happens when an actor takes time to listen to his character's interior voices. Listening to those voices consistently brings a new richness and ambiguity to any part. Remember, *the real action of any part is the interior action* going on behind the character's outward words and physical actions.

Activity A man and a woman have been set up by friends on a blind date. They meet in a bar and discuss how to spend the evening together. Each of Character A's conflicting personality traits are voiced by several class members who sit behind him playing his thoughts (see suggested list below). As the conversation between the couple slowly proceeds, each of the thoughts-voices chimes in, speaking its biased reaction or tendentious thought. Character A listens to his or her “thoughts,” and chooses one to act on. Character B, who cannot hear the voices, reacts only to whatever Character A says or does. Character A may initially get a chorus of “inner voices,” or there may initially be none. The voices may overlap and argue with each

other. Character A should remain in character and take all the time needed to assess and react to them, while B waits as though nothing is amiss. The personality traits (with a voice for each) could include any four of:

- The need to be liked
- The need to be unique
- Fear of rejection
- Fear of being manipulated
- Worry about expense
- Guilt (feeling bad about something you've done)
- Shame (feeling bad about who you are)
- The need to make a conquest
- The need to be normal
- Pride

Discussion

1. How did Character A handle all the input?
2. What were his or her most noticeable influences?
3. Where did Character A break character?
4. Did Character B provide a good foil?
5. What were the most interesting and convincing interior actions?

Variation Characters A and B go through the scene again, but this time Character A imagines the interior voices for himself instead of hearing them. Usually the scene becomes strikingly different and shows what riches true inner conflict brings to an actor's work.

Exercise IMP-19: Gibberish

Purpose Using the voice as an expressive nonverbal instrument and using one's body and voice quality as tools of communication. Too often, actors with lines to speak cease to act with the whole body. This exercise simulates speech but de-emphasizes verbal meaning in favor of underlying intention.

Activity Using the examples in Exercise IMP-8, carry out an activity with a conflict, using gibberish as the characters' language.

Discussion As in Exercise IMP-8

1. How did the actors handle the gibberish conversations?
2. Did they become natural?

Exercise IMP-20: Thrown Together

Purpose To explore the idea that in life we seldom express what really weighs on our minds; instead, we sublimate our unsolved issues through the situation at hand.

Activity Put two incompatible characters together in a credible work situation. Each follows his or her usual agenda in relating to other people. The actors should take the time to keep up an interior (and silent) monologue. No issues are ever named; the needs and reactions of the characters must be expressed through the work they are doing together. Whether they finally get along or find mutual accommodation should not be predetermined.

Discussion

1. Did each character develop?
2. Did each find a way to play out his or her issues through their work?
3. Did each choose a credible path?
4. Did they stay in focus and in character?
5. Did they find a believable way of cooperating?
6. Did you believe the outcome?
7. Did either or both find satisfaction, and did one “win”?
8. What was the obligatory moment in the scene, and what made it so?

Variations Play the scene again, this time with each actor adding his or her character's thoughts in an undertone. Then play the scene as before, with silent, interior monologues.

Discussion Did having to improvise thoughts change or improve the scene? Can you see using this method to solve a problem in a scripted scene?