

Commedia del'Arte

# Word Association Improvisations

The objectives are, improvise freely, handle heckling and work as a team successfully.



# How to train your Zanni's



This is the method I use for actors to find improvisational techniques that zanni must have to win their audience, so it is good to make use of it in the early stages, whilst learning about zanni. It takes at least an hour, and can be revisited later. The objectives are, improvise freely, handle heckling and work as a team successfully. It is to be done without masks.

## **Exercise: Word Association Impro part 1**

This first game is probably familiar; it's designed to help drama students speak before they think. In other words, we are trying to get them to not filter the words they say, but rather to say the first thing that comes to mind. The training is useful in allowing actors to feel that whatever they say when they are improvising is right, and that it's okay during an improvisation to just say the first thing that pops into their heads.

Direct groups of four students to stand in a square (or three stand in a triangle). Have one of the students start by saying a word. It can be anything — 'orange,' 'car,' 'house'—any word they want to say. Next someone else in the group says whatever word came to mind in association with the first person's word. It does not have to be related; it just has to be a word that was inspired from the last word they heard. A short example session might start like: "Orange"... "Round"... "Sun"... "Dial"... "Clock"... "Watch..." The game continues like this. It's best if they do not take turns in an organised fashion, that is, each taking a turn, one at a time, in a clockwise direction. Instead, I encourage whoever is inspired to say the next word.

Perhaps there are three actors, and two of them are quickly firing words off back and forth, while the third student is left out. At first this student may feel as if they don't know what to say, isn't sure how to jump in, etc. This only happens for a moment; as soon as they realise that they are being left behind, they'll jump in very quickly because they will be anxious not to fail.

This exercise trains actors for working in larger groups. It helps them to get over the natural tendency to wait their turn, and allows them to realise that if they jump in and say something it is not going to be seen as acting 'out of turn'.

After they've played at it for a while, ask them to discuss the game. Then instruct students to thank the people they've been working with, disband the groups and direct them to find some space in the room where they can stand by themselves. They'll each need enough room to throw their arms about without hitting someone nearby.

## **Exercise: Word Association Impro part 2**

This is essentially a solo word association exercise. The goal is to get them to rehearse using their body as well their voices, taking a word that they are saying and making it sound nonsensical. If you say a word enough times, it starts to sound like nonsense.

Instruct students to pick a word from the previous game, ask them to physically express the word with a movement, gesture, dance, turn, or a twirl. We are asking the actor to engage in spontaneous movement and speech, the movement being an expression of the sound they are making.

I ask the class to close their eyes while doing the exercise. (It is to be hoped that you'll have enough space in your room so that the students don't bash into each other.) Closing their eyes lets them lose their inhibitions and I find that their movements get much more expansive. You may find a large movement warm-up exercise useful before this.

After they have done a bit of experimenting by themselves with their eyes closed, ask them to continue, but with their eyes open. Next ask them to get back into their word association groups and play the same game as before (Part One), but with movement. Encourage the groups to move around the room, traveling as a group.

I use this with my actors before they are about to do a performance because it brings them together as a group. You can always do a warm-up exercise where they are all just stretching separately, but there is nothing better than having a group who is going to perform, do some warm-ups and improvisations that prepare them to work together.

Once they have done this many, many times (like every day before a show), I find that they get quite sophisticated with their communication, ideas, movement, and expression. They become very nonchalant and playful — this is really where you want to get to with this exercise.

## **Exercise: Word Association Impro part 3**

I encourage the students to continue working in the same groups because they are starting to build a rapport.

Direct them to sit in their small groups and ask them to think of one or two lines. It could be a line or two of poetry, a song, or a famous quote from a play:

"To be or not to be? That is the question."

"Wherefore art thou Romeo?"

"Mary had a little lamb, its fleece was white as snow."

The point is for the group to think of something that the four (or three) of them know and want to rehearse — not something that they'll have to worry about learning. Since you've given no explanation, they'll be wondering what's going to happen. The result is that the majority of the groups choose nursery rhymes (which are less challenging than, say, Shakespeare).

It takes a while, but once they've had some time to discuss it, put the pressure on by saying, "Okay, who has got their line(s) ready?" Perhaps a group announces that they've chosen "Mary had a little lamb." Respond with, "Fantastic; you don't have to be clever or sophisticated. We just want two lines." This helps push the other groups into making a decision. Whatever line they use is "perfect" because they are going to turn it into nonsense anyway.

When everyone has a line, ask them to stand up and say goodbye to their group mates, just like they did when they practised movement and sound in Word Association Part Two. (They will come back together again.) As before, they will need to find enough space to be able to swing their arms and not hit somebody. Announce that now they'll be rehearsing those lines. The students are to explore each word individually, as though it's out of context.

For example, if the line was, "Mary had a little lamb," the student would start with the first word: Mary. She would say, "Mar-eee... Maaa-reee..." while doing movements to these different ways of saying the word. When the student feels that they have sufficiently explored the first word, they will move on to the second: "Had". I might point out that "had" has a hard, quick, staccato kind of sound, and ask them what movement might go with that.

This portion of the exercise isn't really 'word association,' but rather individual words in a particular order. The class wonders where this is going, and you can explain that it is associated with *commedia dell'arte* and that they are training in a precise, step-by-step process which leads to the development of exceptional improvisational skills.



After they've had some rehearsal time by themselves, bring them back to their original groups. (It isn't necessary for every student to have explored every word of their lines before you send them back to their groups.) Tell them they are going to play the same word association game, but this time they'll be using only the words they've chosen.

They'll begin by improvising with the first word in the line — any group member can say it at any time. They spontaneously say the word in its different forms (e.g. "Mar-eee." "Maaa-ry"), until one of the actors feels like it's time to move on to the next word in the line ("Mary had"). When one of the students says the second word, the whole group moves on to that word.

Have them prance around the room, fanning their arms, dancing to each word, and working together as a team. I say, "Pick up on sounds that other people are using. Work as a team. Compliment them by copying them, or go in the opposite direction. If somebody is doing big and broad, go short and small, but still work as a team."

## **Play back the Performance**

Set up for an in-class performance by designating a stage space and an audience space. You may ask them to imagine the setting as one of those cafes where one can go to see poetry and movement being performed. I try to frame it in a way that allows them to connect with the humour of the situation. Each group is to perform, with you adding a level of complication every time.

### **Group 1**

Ask which group wants to go first and direct them to line up with their backs against the wall, as far away as possible from the audience. Tell them that all they have to do is go through what they've just rehearsed.

Introduce the group: "Ladies and Gentlemen, this wonderful performing troupe is going to do a sound and movement piece based on the poem: Mary Had a Little Lamb." Instead of clapping, ask the audience to click (snap) their fingers as people did in the Beatnik era.

When the first group has finished they can sit down. Ask for another group to come up. If the students hesitate, let them know that as the exercise progresses, it gets incrementally more difficult for each group.

## Group 2 - Upstaging

The next level of complication is for group members to both work as a team and upstage each other. Explain that there are many ways to upstage, even when working as a team. An actor can pull focus by doing something out of the ordinary. Give examples. They can come to the front of the stage and take over, getting everyone's attention or they can go to the rear of the room, step up on a chair, and pull focus in a way that may lead all the others to come rushing over to steal the focus back.

As the next group takes its place against the wall, draw a definitive line between the edge of the stage and where the audience is sitting. Tell the actors that they aren't allowed in the audience — not yet. (With upstaging as the goal, you will find that they'll all clamber over each other to get to the audience.)

Introduce as before and get the audience finger clicking. It is quite funny watching people trying to upstage; some take to it quite easily. As the exercise continues, I bring it to their attention that upstaging takes some confidence. If you are going to step out in front of your group, stand apart with your arms out wide, then look the audience in the eye and say your line while your group mates are looking at you wondering what you're doing — well, that takes nerve. I find that most people will step forth, say their word and do their intended action, but then immediately look back at the others and give the nonverbal signal which means, "Quick! Come and save me. Somebody come and steal the attention off me!"

## Group 3 - Upstaging with Commitment!

This group has the same assignment as Group Two, but with one caveat: Advise Group Three that they are not allowed to look back at the rest of the group during upstaging. The upstaging actor must keep eye contact with the audience until somebody steals the focus, and even then he needs to continue maintaining that eye contact. This is a huge challenge. There aren't many people who can pull it off straight away. It is difficult to put all the elements together; the team work, the movement, repeating the words, dancing around, and keeping eye contact with the audience when upstaging.

If you have more than four groups, you can stretch this exercise out a bit.



## Group 4 - Heckling

The last group must try to put all of these things together while being heckled by you, the instructor.

You are going to train them to say the last word that they heard you say. So if you say something like “Ah, this is awful’ The performers then pick up on the word “awful” and use that instead of their rehearsed dialogue (the little bit of poetry they rehearsed and have been using all this time). So they are jumping off track and are improvising a little bit.

Once they have explored the last word that you said as a heckler, they must jump back to their poem. They may have progressed as far as, “Mary had a little lamb, its...” Therefore, 'its' would be the next word they'd need to say. I heckle them a few times—whenever I feel it's necessary to give them a distraction or something to ad-lib with. Sometimes students in the audience start feeling that they're getting the idea, and they may begin to yell out heckling comments: I discourage the other hecklers and tell them that I'm the only one who is allowed to heckle, at least initially.

The value of this exercise is that they have begun to learn how to work as a team. Imagine running this exercise with actors wearing zanni masks. This can be the next step. (This exercise relates well to the Introducing Zanni exercise in Step Eight.)

This 2 hr workshop is beneficial to use as orientation for new students, or an excellent technique to use as a way to get all actors on the same page at the beginning of rehearsals or play building sessions.

I take away words to elicit more physical interaction, more human interaction, larger performance capabilities using physical interaction and physical space rather than the intellect .

Tony Kishawi



About the Author, TONY KISHAWI has been pursuing a love of performance theatre through Commedia dell 'Arte incorporating extensive training in mime, clowning. Tony has an extensive performing career spanning 36 years he discovered a lifetime passion for developing teaching methods and classroom plans which bring out the best in those participating. His experience and knowledge in the field of Commedia dell 'Arte had Tony invited to lead a Commedia Masterclass at the Queensland Drama Teachers Conference in 2009 – 2010 NSW Drama Conference 2016 Creator of the Commedia International Festival 2011 QUT. Has lectured at CQU, QUT, USC, SCU Griffith University and UQ.

Tony has another book  
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