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*The Young Company* is a story of transformation – of small miracles the likes of which I was privileged not only to bear witness to but to play a role in helping to bring about. While the young people who participated are the stars of this story, the process is one that I believe to be universally applicable; it is with the goal, then, of conveying something of the possibilities that exist as well as some of the methodologies used that I have decided to pen this essay. It is my hope that others may find these suggestions useful in their work with young people and that some of the seemingly miraculous results obtained by myself and a small devoted staff may be beneficially replicated. Before I do so, however, I would like to describe three of the many instances of transformation that I witnessed in the seven years' duration of working with the singular and thrilling project formerly known as *The Orlando Shakespeare Festival: The Young Company*. I have selected these three cases not because they are unique, but rather because they are typical. I have also chosen them because they reflect something of the diversity of students with whom these methods were successfully applied. Some of the names have been altered to respect the privacy of the individuals involved.

### **Carlos**

Carlos was a tall handsome young man of Puerto Rican descent. At the age of 19 he came to audition for our Shakespeare ensemble for the second year in a row. Carlos and the high school which he was attending were constant combatants: he was as eager to be done with them as they were to be rid of him. No one really knew where he stood academically at the time of his first audition; he seemed, for the most part, to be somewhere in his junior year. The only certainty was his apparent cockiness and the consistently smug expression he wore along with it. The year of his first audition, we ended up selecting a talented, but intensely shy, young man with a multitude of insecurities over Carlos. After all, our numbers were limited; while we would have liked to include everyone who auditioned, we were forced to limit our selection to those who, in our estimation, would benefit most from our program: seven month personal

experience working on a Shakespeare play in a theater ensemble composed of talented young people nurtured by the warm, loving environment we strove to create. Through exposure to such an environment, to the ensemble process and to the rich material of William Shakespeare, we sought to encourage the positive expression of that enormous creative energy we had observed in so many of these children of so-called “at-risk” backgrounds.

When he reappeared at our audition the following season, Carlos arrived carrying a wooden cane. We learned that he had been involved in a battle with a vending machine that summer and, having flown into a rage over the loss of his change without receiving the requisite coca cola, Carlos had attacked the soda machine. With his exceptional strength, he had managed to knock it over; unfortunately, however, the battle between Carlos and the vending machine did not end there. The unwieldy machine had fallen forward onto Carlos’s leg with a cruel vengeance, pinching this once audacious young man under its heavy weight and leaving him with a permanent souvenir: once so very strong and arrogant, Carlos, at age 19, would now walk for the rest of his life with the aid of a cane.

Carlos was selected for our ensemble the second time around. Still tall and strikingly handsome, he was chosen to play King Alonso in our production of *The Tempest* that season. While retaining the superficial arrogance of an aspiring con-artist, Carlos now possessed a new vulnerability. As with the other participants in our ensemble, Carlos was assigned a mentor - one of a core of dedicated university students who opted to work with our ensemble, serving as big brothers and sisters, chauffeurs, academic tutors, line coaches, friends, advisors, and generally performing any additional supportive functions mutually deemed necessary and helpful.

The character of King Alonso is engaged, during the course of *The Tempest*, in a personal struggle of conscience. He has betrayed Prospero, former Duke of Milan, and will spend the remainder of the play in a tempest of misadventures, leading to deep soul searching remorse, genuine contrition, reconciliation with the man he has betrayed and an

ultimate rediscovery of his personal integrity. The “miracle” of King Alonso’s self transformation occurs in the final act of *The Tempest*. The miracle of Carlos’s transformation occurred a good four months, or two thirds of the way, into the rehearsal period; Carlos had finally stopped speaking his lines in the phony British accent which he had learned in his high school was the only way to “do” Shakespeare and was beginning, at long last, to seriously absorb the character’s moral dilemma into his very being. I remember arriving at our rehearsal that day, and being unexpectedly greeted by Carlos, who, together with his mentor, Samantha, nervously pulled me aside, requesting my immediate attention. As we headed towards one of the empty classrooms in the church building in which we rehearsed, I wondered what this latest crisis would be about. I was accustomed to crises with these kids; in fact, there were only two certainties in the work we had undertaken: first, we could be sure that there would be more crises along the way than any of us would be prepared for, and secondly, we knew we would inevitably be met with the unexpected. What was it now, I wondered. Had someone gotten arrested, expelled from school, thrown out of his house or possibly just decided to “quit” the company?

Samantha’s words were startling. “Carlos called me at 3 am this morning,” she began. “He couldn’t sleep.” She then nudged Carlos, who hesitantly launched into his confession. Apparently, Carlos had phoned his mentor in the middle of the night: he had been so consumed by guilt that he had been unable to sleep. Like the other members of the ensemble, he had signed a written contract with *The Young Company*, promising, among other things, to remain in school, maintain a certain academic standard, and graduate. The crisis was over the fact that, unbeknownst to any of us, Carlos had been expelled from school several weeks earlier. Fearful of being dismissed from *The Young Company* for his breach of contract, Carlos had opted to keep this from all staff members, and, since we had failed to look into the matter, Carlos had managed to retain his role and position in the cast. Unlike in the past, however, when he had so self assuredly lied and manipulated his way around every obstacle that thwarted his path, Carlos found that for the first time in his life, his conscience was bothering him – bothering him so badly, in fact, that he was compelled to confess – first to his mentor; later, to me.

Contrary to Carlos's expectations, I did not dismiss him from the ensemble. In truth, I was overwhelmed by his courage and newfound integrity. We came to an understanding- Carlos, Samantha and I- and added an amendment to his contract: Carlos would complete his studies in night school and take the high school equivalency exam to get his GED. With the assistance of his mentor, Samantha, I monitored Carlos's progress. Indeed, he did receive his GED several months later. He also finished the season with *The Young Company*, presenting one of the most truly felt performances in the history of our ensemble. In recognition of his remarkable turnaround, I presented him with his King Alonso crown as a keepsake. Never was a king's crown more truly deserved.

### **Leora**

Leora first appeared at one of our auditions upon the recommendation of a particularly perceptive history teacher. She was a fighter, he warned us, and was on the verge of being expelled from high school. Her problem seemed to be, in his opinion, that while she was enormously intelligent, she had become repeatedly frustrated in being insufficiently challenged by her school; moreover, she had patience neither for wasted classroom time nor for repeated academic "spoon feeding." Leora, her teacher informed us, desperately needed a positive creative channel for her overwhelming physical energy as well as for her mind.

The role of Titania, the fairy queen in *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, seemed the ideal vehicle. Not only did Titania's words offer Leora an entrée into the majestic poetry of Shakespeare, but the fantasy of the fairy world offered her an almost unlimited turf for her wonderfully creative imagination. We found out as well, that Leora was a natural dancer- the explosive energy that she had formerly expended in fighting was almost limitless; willing to take exceptional risks, she undertook to explore and invent unique ways to move and vocalize. Our challenge in working with Leora arose out of her frustration and frequent anger with fellow ensemble members who did not quite meet her extraordinary standards. Working with Leora was like a roller coaster ride; in the end, however, the discipline required by the production fueled by Leora's infatuation with the

role of the fairy queen, prevailed. We came close that season, but never experienced, the notorious explosions which had marred Leora's high school experience. Clearly, while much of her aggressive impulsiveness was being rechanneled, there remained an unresolved restlessness still seething within her.

Much to my surprise, Leora applied and returned the following season as an alumni volunteer. In this capacity, she would participate as a role model and support new members of the ensemble. I was, at first, skeptical at the prospect, for it would require a great deal of patience and tolerance – qualities which had not been strong points with Leora the previous season. Nevertheless, my delight that this young woman had elected to return to assist other young people, hopefully giving back some of what she had gained through her participation in *The Young Company*, superceded my skepticism. I wondered, as well, whether Leora was Jewish (as her Hebrew-sounding name seemed to indicate) and whether perhaps this young woman had been driven by a desire to investigate her Jewish roots, for our production that season was to be an original adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice* set in the Buchenwald concentration camp of Nazi Germany. As I thought more about it, however, I recalled how when asked about her name the previous season, she had responded that her name was not of Hebrew, but rather of Italian, origin.

Meanwhile, all too aware of the pervasive ignorance of our general student population regarding the horrendous details of this particular historic period, I realized that providing our ensemble with a solid educational base of knowledge would be critical to a successful production of this nature. To this end, I was most fortunate in obtaining the support and cooperation of the local Holocaust Memorial Resource and Education Center of Central Florida, who generously provided important educational resource material and made available to us the assistance of their devoted educational consultant. As the documentation and presentations were more and more vividly absorbed by our sensitive, racially diverse group of young people, I noted their growing awareness of the very real horrors of prejudice and intolerance – and of the terrible atrocities perpetrated against the Jewish people by the Nazi regime in their attempt and near success in annihilating an

entire people. Genocide and respect for our various individual backgrounds became more than vocabulary words and casual clichés.

Leora that season was asked to understudy the role of Jessica, self-hating daughter to Shylock, the Jew. As in the case of Carlos, we were approximately four months into the rehearsal period when the transformation in Leora became manifest: appearing at rehearsal one day, Leora declared that she had brought with her a precious personal possession- a silver Star of David. She had brought it, apparently, in connection with a discussion that had transpired at the previous rehearsal- a discussion centered around Jessica's decision to discard her Jewish faith, family and community, so as to ingratiate herself with the dominant Christian community. At a critical moment in the play, the character of Jessica chooses not only to secretly elope with the morally bankrupt Lorenzo, but to betray her father as well, stealing virtually all of his worldly possessions, including a priceless turquoise ring. This ring had been of sentimental value precisely because it had been gifted to him by Leah, his beloved deceased wife and Jessica's mother. Our discussion ended with Leora's suggestion that perhaps at the moment of her momentous decision, she could remove a Star of David which she might be wearing about her neck, in order to symbolize her personal rejection of her faith and community.

Leora arrived at our rehearsal prepared to test out the symbolically powerful act of removing the Star of David during the critical scene in the play; the theatrical effect of her action proved impressive, and it was decided that the Star of David bit should remain in our production. Later that day, props were collected to be held for future rehearsals. Leora grabbed her Star of David. "I can't leave it here," she told me, "it was a gift from my grandparents, and I couldn't stand for anything to happen to it. I'll bring it back myself next rehearsal."

Bits and pieces of Leora's Jewish identity cropped up in subsequent rehearsals of *The Merchant of Venice* that season. We learned details regarding Leora's family and about their personal connection to the holocaust, along with the fact that her name was definitely of Hebrew origin.

To the amazement of some of her high school peers, cohorts, and even former teachers, Leora, now a senior in high school, was accepted with a full scholarship to Princeton University. She settled into college that fall. I heard from her the following spring: she was majoring in Near Eastern and Judaic Studies, she told me, and had decided to go abroad for a year to study at Hebrew University in Jerusalem. She was fascinated by Middle Eastern politics, and tremendously stimulated by the intelligent, intellectual discussions which surrounded her at Princeton. Most importantly, she wrote me, she had finally “found” herself, and she wished to thank me and *The Young Company* for enabling her to accept and even embrace her true identity.

### **Alexi**

My oldest memory of Alexi is a picture of a shy skinny teenager with stringy waist-long hair and poor posture. His eyes habitually focused down at his feet, Alexi would glance up occasionally only to orient himself or to briefly respond to an adult or other authority figure. Upon speaking, Alexi would again lower his eyes immediately to his feet. After Alexi’s first group audition for our ensemble, it became the custom for several of the others to refer to him only half jokingly as “Jesus” because of his long hair, beard and piercing dark eyes. We did not know it at the time, but Alexi’s terribly low self esteem came coupled with an inwardly suppressed anger, the intensity of which, whenever it made its rare appearance, would erupt with an astonishingly menacing bite.

Alexi was asked to join our ensemble, playing the role of Tybalt, the angry, provocative young cousin to Juliet, in our production of *Romeo and Juliet* that season. As was to become our frequent practice, we shifted the setting of the play: that season it was from the Verona, Italy of the 1500’s to the Sarajevo of 1993. In our production, Romeo and his family were Serbian; Juliet and hers were Bosnian. As with our adaptation of *The Merchant of Venice*, our version of *Romeo and Juliet* required that our ensemble receive extensive, informational background; again, as with *The Merchant*, we solicited the support and cooperation of certain knowledgeable individuals in the community who had

lived or whose families currently lived in the war-torn Sarajevo in which we planned to set our production.

In truth, realistically and pragmatically, there was little we as American students and teachers could do to alleviate the suffering of the people of Sarajevo; we set for ourselves, however, the modest goals of raising community awareness and of using the brilliant text of *Romeo and Juliet* as applied to current social history to teach our young people about the dangers of intolerance and prejudice, which culminated in the horrendous, but inevitable, act of genocide, or, what was euphemistically referred to as “ethnic cleansing.”

Alexi’s character, Tybalt, was, in our production, a Bosnian whose animosity against Romeo and his Serbian cohorts, plays an important role in fueling, if not instigating, the unfortunate series of events leading to the play’s catastrophic outcome - the tragically premature deaths of six of its young characters. Over and over again, we struggled with Alexi, reminding him to stand up straight so as to give outward expression to his anger, rather than directing it, inaudibly, towards his feet. In truth, Alexi created an expressive portrait of a deeply troubled young Tybalt. The carefully choreographed fight scene in which he kills Mercutio, and is subsequently murdered by Romeo, was moving and suspenseful. With each performance, Alexi’s self-confidence seemed to grow; with each new audience, his voice became more and more assuredly audible, focused and disturbing.

Like Leora, Alexi returned for a second season to serve as an alumni volunteer to our ensemble. In our production of *The Tempest* his second season, he understudied the role of Prince Ferdinand, and, indeed, ended up predictably coming to our rescue when we lost our Prince less than two weeks before opening night. Alexi returned to assist us a third year in a row, volunteering once again, to perform any tasks necessary to support the participants and goals of *The Young Company*. Again, we found ourselves calling upon Alexi for help: finding ourselves short of dependable “mechanicals” for our

production of *A Midsummer Night's Dream*, Alexi readily assumed the role of Snug the joiner.

After three seasons of work with *The Young Company*, the initial lack of self-confidence we had first seen in Alexi was hardly perceptible. Moreover, he had become our most constant “savior,” entering the scene over and over again, to “rescue” the ensemble from some of the unexpected, as well as expected, crises that went along with working with “at-risk” youngsters. Serving as an emergency driver, prop man, publicist or pizza deliverer, Alexi’s concern for the success and overall cohesion of the company assumed a devotion that became a true model.

Upon graduating from high school, Alexi entered the local community college. Two years later, he attended a *Young Company* reunion, surprising all of us by appearing with his beautiful fiancée –a confident and intelligent young woman of color. With his head erect, neatly trimmed hair, and clean-shaven face, Alexi exuded self-confidence and warmth- a completely altered presence. Alexi had run for and obtained an important position on the student council of the local community college he had been attending for the last two years. Now planning to enter politics, Alexi told us he believed it incumbent upon him to do all that was possible to better this world. In order to accomplish his newly discovered dream, Alexi would complete his four year degree with the support of a full government scholarship at an excellent out-of-state college, go on to law school, and eventually run for and serve in a political office. The reality of this exuberant young man, with his genuine confidence in his own capacity to make a positive difference in his world, moved me beyond expression; for Alexi, the entire world had become an expanded *Young Company* - a community of creative, diverse, inter-connected souls, each one worthy of respect and compassion, and all now demanding every bit of his personal effort in insuring the well being of the whole community.

Carlos, Leora, Alexi and countless others, continue to amaze me because of the transformative power of what might have appeared, at first sight, to be little more than a

mere theatrical venture. What was it that produced these and other similarly dramatic outcomes – motivating such remarkable growth of spirit and human potential?

In retrospect, I believe that whatever happened was conceived and came to fruition, based on the combination of three basic ingredients: firstly, a structure of interwoven and mutually dependent principles - principles which are indeed the principles of all good ensemble work; secondly, a serious, but original probe into the profoundly rich material provided by William Shakespeare; and, finally, the participation of an extraordinarily devoted group of staff, volunteer associates and university mentors.

Regarding the training of the ensemble in the principles of ensemble, as in all meaningful teaching, these principles must be practiced, rather than merely preached, by the director as a model, and subsequently, by all connected with the project. The principles activate a process and environment which must be reinforced, safeguarded and continually applied throughout the six month rehearsal period. As difficult as this may often be, not only for the director (whose reputation and continued financial support may well rest on the “look” of the final production), but also for the student, (whose self esteem is inextricably bound up with the public “success” of the final outcome), concerns about the product must often come second; the priority must be the ongoing nurturing of a love for and joy in the ensemble process and the providing of a safe, supportive environment which encourages creative risk taking, playfulness and honest exploration. It is only by the initial setting aside of the limitations created by expectations about outcome, that true discoveries – about self, others and the play – become possible. In the end, it is these very discoveries that paradoxically result in remarkable productions of impressive truthfulness, and serve as a springboard for originality and human transformation.

The principles referred to above are well known to those who have had the pleasure of experiencing true ensemble work; they include honesty; acceptance of oneself and others; attentive listening coupled with genuine responding; trust; a willingness to suspend judgment in order to play with child-like innocent abandon; a sense of responsibility and commitment to the ensemble and, by extension, to the rest of the world; and finally, a willingness, or better put, a courage, to take risks, most specifically the risk of failing or

appearing “stupid.” Clearly, any one of the above guidelines requires that the others be present as well: for example, honesty will not emerge without an atmosphere wherein acceptance and trust are encouraged nor can there be acceptance and trust without honesty; attentive listening is pointless without honesty; finding the courage to take risks is simply not possible without trusting that the ensemble will take seriously its mission to protect each of its members- both emotionally and physically; and genuine responding, is useless, or even counterproductive, without attentive listening to the needs of others.

The fostering of self acceptance and embracing of the work that is to be embarked upon begins, in our case, with an opening orientation, in which ensemble members are introduced to the staff, university mentors, alumni volunteers, one another and to the goals of the project. The atmosphere of this opening meeting is critical: a tone of enthusiasm, friendly camaraderie and commitment to the work and to each other must be established from the first moment of the group’s coming together. The mere act of sharing a snack – even of a most simple nature (our financial resources were limited)- we found well worth the minimal expense and effort involved in terms of the payoff in group cohesiveness and bonding, and so we came to provide snacks regularly at all rehearsals and ensemble meetings.

*The Young Company* requires a contract signing to precede all work with the ensemble: this contract signing takes place at the opening meeting of the ensemble and must be regarded with the utmost seriousness and respect. Once this matter has been completed, basic theater games and exercises aimed at reinforcing some of the principles enumerated above are implemented. Decisions regarding the ultimate casting of the production are reserved for later in the rehearsal process. The early emphasis is on learning to work together with attentiveness, acceptance and trust, and on experiencing the joy of creative play and true interaction among the ensemble members. (\* See notes at conclusion of this chapter for suggested introductory games, exercises, etc.)

The second ingredient requisite to the success of *The Young Company* is a serious, yet jubilant, examination of the text of the play itself. In our case, the text was generally

edited, and, often adapted, by the artistic and consulting directors, prior to its being introduced to the students. The play itself is introduced, in fact, only after several weeks of preliminary ensemble building. It is then read out loud, with members of the ensemble assuming and rotating roles in a manner that is both attentive and playful. The improvisational ensemble games and exercises continue, but begin to take shape in the context of some of the emerging themes and images of the particular play that we are reading and preparing to perform. Improvisation, musical effects and movement games are interjected into the reading of the text. The study atmosphere is one of open-minded joint exploration, as we attempt to elicit and build connections – both personal and social- between the world of Shakespeare’s text and that of the participants.

With Shakespeare, the richness of the material seems to strike deep chords within young people, and to trigger much of the soul searching and serious examination of self that our work has engendered. To this end, I strongly recommend, if at all possible, seeking out the assistance- even short-term-of an individual who is well enough acquainted with Shakespeare’s work to elicit this sort of response and to serve as a coach when questions arise or explanations are called for. In our case, we were fortunate to have been inspired in our exploration of the text by our consulting director, Dr. Stuart Omans, whose wisdom, respect for text and encouragement of individual discovery served to set a tone for all of the work which would follow. While the artistic director of our ensemble maintains final authority as to the ultimate direction the production will take, honest suggestions and creative exploration by cast members are welcomed and often incorporated into the end product, which will be a compilation of the suggestions (often the framework) introduced by the director and original, honest, but respectful probing of the characters and situations by ensemble members, mentors and participating alumni volunteers.

A few words will suffice here regarding the third necessary ingredient in *The Young Company* story – the participation of a devoted core of staff, mentors, and volunteers. There is very little guidance to be offered in this area that is not already self-evident. Finding those rare individuals who would work successfully with “at-risk” teenagers has

more to do with finding people with compassion and a strong desire to make a difference in the lives of young people than with any other learned skill that it is possible to acquire. For me, locating the “right” people has usually been a question of intuition: I seek out sensitive individuals who wish to share their love and knowledge of art, literature, music, theater and/or Shakespeare, and who are both idealistic and realistic enough to be patient with young people whose “challenging” lives are just one of the many reasons for their all too human shortcomings. I have been so fortunate in drawing an array of wonderfully devoted people to this work, that I have come to believe that if one creates the “right” project, the “right” people will somehow be guided towards it. The task is simply to stay the course.

With all three of the required ingredients in place, then, the rehearsal process continues and the play begins to take shape. While the ensemble members must usually be repeatedly reminded that the work they have undertaken is to be seriously committed to with focus and self-sacrifice, the atmosphere of spontaneous playfulness must always be preserved. Characters and scenes are continuously open to development, reevaluation and change. The combination of these apparent opposites -disciplined focus and free spontaneous play – can be a challenging, if not frustrating endeavor; with perseverance and faith in the process, however, the shared struggle to realize an effective balance of opposites serves as a powerful unifying force in bonding the ensemble. Upon reflection, it occurs to me, in fact, that this is indeed a microcosm of the struggle that each one of us must do battle with as we grapple with challenging issues confronting the day to day living of our lives. Moreover, the notion that there may just possibly be a positive creative application to living life joyfully in the moment and relating to others honestly and without prejudgment of outcome, while maintaining our sense of discipline and focused perseverance – may be one of the most valuable lessons to be drawn from an experience such as *The Young Company*.

Are the unique personally transformative outcomes to be realized through the journey a matter of the miraculous or due merely to a common sense process as simple as respecting our young people as human souls awaiting the opportunity to be challenged to

understand, think independently and create with singular individuality? I leave this to your own determination. For me, however, as well as for those who have worked alongside of me, the visible results in human transformation continue to testify to the fact that the process inevitably works. And whether it is a matter of miracle, faith or plain common sense, *The Young Company's* program is one whose replication might just serve that need for meaningful discovery of self which continues to be so painfully unmet for countless young people today.

### **Addendum**

Ten sample ensemble building games, improvisations and opening exercises follow. I am here indebted to Gary Izzo's *Acting Interactive Theater*, and to Amiel Schotz's *Theater Games and Beyond*, both of which provide excellent assortments of games and activities, and to nameless scores of other acting coaches and teachers from whose wisdom and techniques I have borrowed extensively in my work. To the director who would like to work with theater games, literally hundreds of books of theater games, improvisations and exercises, are readily available.

#### **1. Introducing ourselves:**

In this deceptively simple game, the group forms a circle and, after a brief, warm-up/stretch session, is told that we will go around the circle with each person saying her name, while playing with the sounds of the letters and the "feel" of their combined resonance in her mouth. Also, and in conjunction with exploring the sound of the name, each of the participants is to spontaneously produce a movement that "feels" like a fit to the name and to one's self; after each person has pronounced her name and expressed along with it some kind of movement, the entire circle reproduces the name, attempting to recreate both the verbal and physical movement pattern and emotion that has

accompanied the name. The important premise here is that there is no wrong sound or movement. Once the realization registers that there are no “rights” and “wrongs” in this stage of creative work - that we are here for genuine exploration without preconceptions about what we are to produce – there tends to be an incredible sense of relief and freedom. Along with this shared sensation of relief and freedom emerge feelings of joyfulness, self confidence and the newly found recognition that we are all unique individuals who are safely allowed to explore ourselves in the group setting. In reality, being allowed or, even more precisely, encouraged to experiment with the knowledge that no judgments will be made against us is a gift which is all too seldom offered in our schools or other educational settings.

Admittedly, among any newly formed group of this nature, there will inevitably be a certain amount of embarrassment and trepidation: these exercises in form and objective may well feel uncomfortably foreign at first to those who are unfamiliar with this type of creative process. In our ensemble, this feeling was alleviated by the participation of seasoned alumni role models who had experienced these “games” and by staff who modeled childlike playfulness in the presence of the new ensemble members.

One of the most critical aspects of this “game” is that the players not pre-plan their actions. This is a difficult task for most, particularly because so many young people are accustomed to hearing the command to “think before acting” from adults and other authority figures. In the “game” described above, the opposite is the case: the more spontaneously the participants can express their actions, the better. Unlike many of the day to day goings on of the young people, the goal here is to move away from the regimen imposed daily by their “rational” minds, and to summon up an entirely different part of their being. After the first person creates her name/movement, and the others repeat it, the process continues around the circle, until, by the end of the process, the group is repeating the names and movements of all the players. This “game” is coincidentally an excellent way to familiarize the group and director with the names of the group members.

## **2. Truth or Lie**

Seated in a circle, each ensemble member makes one true statement about himself, as the others carefully observe the member's voice and body language. Then, each member proceeds to make one false statement. Again, the other ensemble members should take note of any changes in voice and/or body language. On the third round, the player states a truth or a lie, attempting in either case, to convince the others that his statement is true. Through careful observation and listening, the ensemble members try to determine the truth or falsehood of his statement. Not only does this game have the obvious advantage of forcing the participants to zero in on and truly take note of the body language, voice tones and other characteristics of their peers, but it results in a great deal of laughter, self disclosure and discovery about one another, and ultimately, brings about a wonderful sense of camaraderie as we discover the truth or falsehood of one another's statements.

### **3. Interview**

The group is divided into couples - preferably members should be paired up with someone they do not know well. Each person gets four to five minutes to interview her partner; after the eight to ten minutes during which both partners have interviewed one another, each member will introduce her partner to the group. A variation on this exercise is to ask the partner who is doing the introducing to slip three lies about the interviewee into the introduction with the objective of passing these lies off as truth. The lies must not be pre-agreed on by the partners, but are to be created spontaneously. In order to "deceive" the group, both partners must behave as if the lies were completely true. The rest of the ensemble members try to identify the three lies.

This game has several benefits. First, it provides a safe structure whereby each member of the ensemble is afforded the opportunity to get to know one other member more closely. Building on this aspect of the game, the remaining members of the ensemble are introduced to one another in a more creative, focused manner. Also, the added twist of the three "slipped in" lies will initiate an immediate bond between the partners who are working together to "fool" the audience. The audience is, in turn, more tuned in to each member because of the challenge of picking up on all three of the lies, thereby exercising their listening and observation skills, and more truly observing their fellow players.

#### 4. Healing Gift

The ensemble is divided into two equal sub-groups - one stands at one end of the space; the other faces them at the opposite end of the room. One of the groups is told that they are to play the “healers”: in other words, each of them is to imagine that he possesses a special, magical ability to “heal.” The others are each asked to imagine being in need of some form of “healing” and to attempt to convey this silently to one of the healers so as to attract him to come to his assistance. The “healers” are asked to “study” the members on the other side of the room and to decide, each on his own, who is most in need of his healing and precisely what is needed. It may be a gentle shoulder massage, a handshake, a pat on the back, a listening ear, a few words of encouragement, or even a funny story or a joke. Or it may be something entirely different from any of these. The important thing is for the “healer” to completely tune in to the person needing his healing, so that the appropriate “healing” act can be accomplished.

When the leader gives the signal, each “healer” makes his way across the room to the person upon whom he has chosen to bestow his “healing” gift. Two “healers” cannot “heal” the same individual: if one person has been selected by a particular “healer,” the other healers must choose partners who have not yet been selected.

This exercise is one of this writer’s favorites for many reasons. Perhaps most significantly, just as all good acting is grounded in truthful human emotions and real actions, the notion of “pretending” in this case is immediately superseded by reality. The objective of “healing” here becomes a true driving force because ultimately it is a real aspect of our human nature. Just as substantial is the very real human need to be “healed” or touched in some way by another. The players, then, through this exercise, come to realize personally that good acting springs from a truthful core intention. The act of giving and receiving - of real human contact - in fact, lies at the core of the ensemble experience. Indeed, this is the very heart of the theatrical process. By drawing the players immediately into this powerful experience, this “game” provides one of the most compelling entries into the work that will be further developed through the human connections forged among them. Moreover, this “game” is one of the most nearly perfect demonstrations of the fact that belief in oneself – confidence in one’s own inner strength and ability to touch others - is the first step in the transformation of the intangible to the

tangible. Miraculously, while belief in oneself may begin as a mere game of pretend, the exercise tends to draw the player into actually believing in, discovering and then assuming the person power that he has imagined. From here, it is only a matter of time and repetition until the player comes to view himself differently and in a more competent and effective light than ever before. Like so much of the magic of theater, this “game” must be experienced in order to be truly appreciated.

### **5. Walk, Freeze; Walk, Hi; Walk, Name; Walk Hug; Walk, Compliment**

This game is a simple exercise serving to get people up, moving and making physical connections with one another. There is no anxiety or stress because there are no judgments; the completion of simple physical tasks is both easy and enjoyable.

The players are first asked to walk around comfortably and randomly, but at an energetic pace. At the command “freeze”, they are to stop all movement, holding their precise physical posture. This is repeated several times. They then commence walking once again, but on the command to stop, each person lets out an energetic whooping “hi” to whomever is physically nearest her. By the third section, the command “name” is the signal to make eye contact with another player and say one’s name. This is repeated several times until the players are instructed once again to walk. On the command “hug,” each player gently hugs whoever happens to be closest. (This can be varied by announcing a specific number of people who must be hugged when the command “hug” is given.) As with the other segments of the exercise, this is also repeated several times. The players are finally asked to walk energetically, but then to stop and pay whomever they find themselves closest to a personal compliment that is sincere. (It may be as simple as complimenting one’s outfit or as deep as complimenting one’s character.) The person complimented is to receive the compliment, with a simple “thank you.”

In addition to getting people moving energetically but safely, this exercise provides practice in learning to listen and respond spontaneously without judging or second guessing. Moreover, it is an important bonding activity, particularly as each participant is asked to touch, hug, make eye contact with and ultimately truthfully compliment another member of the ensemble. Finally, as is true of each of the games we are proposing, this

activity provides a shared, pleasurable experience, reinforcing the newly forged bonds emerging among the members of the ensemble.

## **6. Patterns**

The group is asked to merely walk around the space in no particular pattern or manner. As the members are walking, they are asked to try to sense the pattern being created by the group and to attempt to allow themselves to become part of the group's pattern. Once a pattern has been created, the player are asked to break out of the pattern, walk in a random fashion once again, sense the pattern that is now the will of the group, and gradually allow themselves to become a part of it once again. This exercise is an excellent means of teaching the players something of what is involved in working as an ensemble- each player must learn to tune in to the will of the group. One learns both to merge one's personal intent in the collective enterprise, as well as to break out of the collective work when necessary. In other words, there must be a flow of give and take in this work, as well as a highly developed awareness of one another.

It is important to bear in mind that this exercise can appear as a complete failure when first attempted. The director must be prepared to accept that the young ensemble may not be able to master this one in the early stages of the work without regarding the effort as a failure; if one approaches this with a sense of humor and an honest readiness to observe the group dynamics as they develop and change over the course of the rehearsal period, however, it can be an effective and fun means of assessing the group cohesiveness of the ensemble. Needless to say, with a sense of humor, rather than a judgmental attitude, this game rarely fails to elicit laughter, pleasure and surprise – all of which will serve to further bond the ensemble players.

## **7. The People Knot**

Players form a circle and, with everyone's eyes closed, all reach their arms straight out in front of them so as to clasp a hand with each of their hands. No one can hold both

hands of the same person or the hand of someone right next to themselves in the circle. Everyone now opens her eyes and, climbing through and around one another, without letting go of anyone's hand, all try to untangle the knot so as to form a ring of people holding hands (or possibly two interconnected circles of hands) side by side. The participants may pivot their grasp, but may not let go of any hands.

This exercise is a wonderfully structured and safe way to allow the players to become physically comfortable with one another while working on a common goal- the untangling of the knot and restitution of the perfect circle. The effort to solve the problem of the knot as a group requires cooperation, team work, effort, perseverance, creativity, and flexibility – all of which are important ensemble skills whose acquisition will clearly enhance the process and results of the ensemble work. Also, these ensemble skills constitute invaluable life learning skills.

### **8. Freeze Tag**

This is another popular improvisational warm-up. In this version, one player begins in the center of the circle of players. He does not know who, where or what he is doing here. Anyone from the circle may come up with an idea and then enter the space, interacting with the person in the center accordingly. It is the responsibility of the person in the center to pick up cues as to what his relationship with the other player is supposed to be and to play along accordingly. The scene may be as realistic or as fantastic as its conceiver determines. The player who enters may determine, for example, that he is watering his droopy flower, so that the person in the center ends up becoming the flower. By the same token, the “flower” may end up speaking, complaining, dancing or doing any other sort of “unrealistic” activity in connection with the person who is watering it. The main thing, however, is to go along with (i.e. accept the offer) the concept or frame presented by whomever is determining the scene. When someone else in the circle spontaneously spots an opportunity for a new altered scene (through body positions of the two players), he calls out “freeze” and the players in the center freeze their positions at that moment. The person who has called for a “freeze” then enters the circle, taps the player he wishes to leave the center space, and proceeds to play whatever idea he has brought to the playing center. Once again, the person in the center plays along with the idea.

This favorite warm-up teaches several important ensemble skills. Perhaps the most crucial skill is to open oneself up without judgment so as to accept the scenario created by the other no matter how ridiculous the opening set up may at first appear. Of equal import is the willingness to “let go” or to allow the improvisation to go wherever the players jointly take it, without either player feeling compelled to force or determine the course and outcome of the scene. This improvisation demands trust – in oneself, in the other, and, ultimately, in the players as a team constituting a newly formed entity with its own will. The thrill of participating in and allowing the scene to emerge, is akin to the thrill of ensemble creation. At the same time, the common awareness that the scene may be completely altered at any moment enhances the exciting nature of the endeavor. As in life, one can never be certain of what the next moment will offer; nevertheless, the players must attempt to greet each moment with openness and enthusiasm, allowing themselves to follow their intuitive impulses as they arise, while still playing within the structure of the game.

## **9. Trust Circle**

The trust circle is another favorite among ensemble exercises. The players form a circle (6-8 is about the optimum number of people per circle; if necessary, more than one circle may be simultaneously formed), standing closely together facing forward with their shoulders nearly touching. There should be no gaps in the circle. One player steps into the center of the circle, closes her eyes and places her crossed arms over her chest. The players around her take a firm stance. I suggest that each one lean into the circle with front knee bent and solidly reinforced by the back leg. All then put their hands up, palms open and facing the person in the center. They are informed that it is all of their responsibility to see to it that the person in the center does not fall- therefore, they must give total concentration to the exercise and not cause distractions through talking or joking. The person in the center stands relaxed, but with her feet rigidly in place, and begins to fall backward until supported by the other players. The players carefully push the person in the center back and forth, and gently around so that she falls softly around the circle. The pushing should be light and easy at first, but then with greater force and firmness as the person in the center becomes more comfortable and trusting of the group.

After a few minutes, the group leader stops and steadies the person who has been inside the circle; she opens her eyes and rejoins the circle. The exercise proceeds with each player taking a turn at being in the center

This activity is great fun, tending to bring out the child in each player. Players repeatedly report experiencing tremendous pleasure in being gently tossed around the circle while gradually increasing their trust and confidence in the group's dependability in catching them before they fall. Yielding control to a reliable, trustworthy community can elicit a wondrous sense of freedom and joy for the player in the center, who, precisely because he knows and trusts that the community will be there for him, can take advantage of the opportunity to let go of some of his own self-controls, and the need to be there at every instant – focused and attentive so as to take care of one another and prevent any possible injury – offers the ensemble players an incomparable exercise in communal responsibility.

### **10. Whose Hand**

Players are instructed to remove all jewelry, watches, Band-Aids, etc. from their right hands. All then stand silently within the playing area and close their eyes, stretching out their right hands. The leader then helps guide each one to another, so that every person is holding the right hand of another, then asks the players to remain silent but to carefully explore tactilely the hand they are now holding. They are coached to ask themselves (without responding verbally) the following questions: Is this person a male or a female? Is this a “hard” person or a “soft” person? Is this someone I would trust? Is this person a loyal person? Would he make a good friend? Does this person have a sense of humor? Would I enjoy spending time with this person? Is this a shy or an outgoing person? Is this a confident person? Is this an intellectual person? An artistic person? An athletic person? A wise person? What else can I surmise about this person based on his hand? The leader then asks the players to release the hands of their partners, and, with all the players' eyes still closed, she separates the pairs, leading them to distant parts of the playing space. All are told that they may now open their eyes. Their task is, through their sense of sight, to now find the person whose hand they have been exploring, and to test the hand to make sure it is indeed the right person.

This exercise is ideally suited to developing personal and group awareness of stereotypical assumptions and conclusions, with an eye toward destroying these stereotypical associations. The group can quickly appreciate that by using their sense of touch, rather than sight, the individual players can come to “see” a whole new set of qualities in another individual, and to negate much of what they have previously surmised based on stereotypical assumptions conditioned by media or visual messages.

Often, new and surprising discoveries are made. I remember one occasion, for example, when one of the female players was amazed to finally discover that the hand she had been examining belonged to a male, rather than a female, player. In keeping with certain male/female stereotypes, she had not allowed for the possibility that a male’s hand could contain the kind and degree of sensitivity that she had experienced in that hand. It is also quite telling to observe players who are surprised when they learn that the color of the hand is not at all what they had assumed. A secondary, but still significant, outcome of this exercise is that an important recognition is suddenly restored our frequently neglected sense of touch. Thus, through personal rediscovery, we are reminded of the insight that is possible to attain through an alternative, under-used sensation.

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### **11. Leading the Blind**

Players pair up once again. One player is the “blind” one and the other is the “guide”. The leader then explains that each guide is responsible for leading the “blind” partner safely, so as to give the “blind” partner as whole and as extensive an experience of the world as possible. The leader then specifies a particular time, by which all players are to be brought back to the rehearsal space. The “blind” partner must close his eyes and keep them closed during the duration of the exercise. A half-hour is a good amount of time for a first-time experience of this nature. After the exercise is completed, the partners may wish to change roles, so as to “return” the experience.

### **13. Expert and Translator (of Gibberish)**

Many theater games use gibberish. The following is one of my favorites: The players pair up once again. One of each pair is an expert on some topic, or a poet, and proceeds to deliver a lecture on his subject of expertise or to deliver a poem using gibberish. The job of the partner is to “translate” into comprehensible English what the “expert” is saying, line by line or phrase by phrase. Since the “translator” actually has no clue regarding what the gibberish means, he must carefully consider the demeanor and vocal qualities of the expert or poet to derive some kind of legitimate meaning of the gibberish. He must then proceed with confidence, just as if he were indeed a true translator.

### **14. Transforming Objects**

The members stand in a circle. One person finds an imaginary object and proceeds to use the object in some way. She then passes it to the player next to her, who also handles it until it gradually transforms itself into something else. She then uses this new object and passes it on to the player next to her who handles it until it once again transforms into a new object. This continues all around the circle until each player has had a turn to handle and transform an object. The important stipulation here is that the players “allow” the

object to transform itself, not that they impose a transformation upon it, especially something that they have pre-planned.

### **15. Join In**

One player begins an activity without telling the others what it is. As they begin to recognize the activity, they join in, either sharing in the original activity, or doing an activity that is in some way related to the original activity. This game may be played with or without words. Sounds are, however, always permissible when needed.

### **16. Machine**

One player steps into the playing space and begins a physical rhythmic movement, with a corresponding rhythmic sound. As the others look at him, they try to imagine him as part of one big imaginary machine. One by one, the other joins in, each trying to contribute an aspect that will help create one whole, complete machine. A variation of this is that the leader will call out a “theme” for the machine, so that the overall machine must have some relation to the theme. For example, dream, nightmare, silly, blue are all possible “themes” for an imaginary machine. The important aspect of this exercise is to really consider carefully what is missing from the machine and to supply it. Players should remember to use all parts of their bodies, and to connect themselves to what has already been begun.

### **17. Ball**

Players form a circle. One player picks up an imaginary basketball and throws it to another player across the circle. The imaginary ball must be handled (thrown as well as caught) as if it had absolute reality- a task which requires complete cooperation and focus. The ball must remain the same size, shape and weight for everyone. After some practice with one size of ball, the players may change the size, shape and weight of the ball. The group leader may call out the changes, or the changes can be initiated by the players themselves. Eventually, different objects may be substituted for balls (i.e. hand grenades, eggs or crystal wine glasses).

### **18. Balloons**

The players lie down on the floor, soft and limp. They are deflated balloons. Then the leader begins to mime blowing the balloons up. With each new breath, the balloons

become more and more filled with air, until they are at full capacity. Then, the leader pantomimes popping each balloon with a pin. The players respond as if they were being suddenly popped, each balloon in its own way.

### **19. Different walks**

The players are asked to walk randomly about the space. Then, after a few moments of natural walking, they are asked to “test out” walking in different ways: the idea is to experiment with how a physical change effects their mood and or persona. They are to test the following ways to walk: with their spines stiffened; with their necks pulled forward; with their chins lifted up in the air; with their heads dropped forward; with their left shoulders up; with their shoulders pulled back; with their shoulders rounded forward; with their arms stiff; with their hips, knees, and toes turned inward; with their hips, knees, and toes turned outward; bouncing from foot to foot; shuffling from foot to foot; with their weight on their heels; with their upper bodies bent forward; with their weight shifting from side to side.

### **20. Musicalizing the Poem**

The ensemble is divided into groups, 4-5 players to a group. Each group is given a poem or reading which has been selected by the director because of its connection to the play. The groups are then given drums and other assorted percussion instruments; they are asked to spend about 20 minutes reading the poem and setting it to a beat, using the drum and/or any other percussion instruments desired by the group. After the 20 minute preparation time is over, each group presents its work to the others.