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drama games

FOR DEVISING

Foreword by Mike Leigh



NICK HERN BOOKS
London
www.nickhernbooks.co.uk

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INTRODUCTION

If you take the time to stop by a park or a playground anywhere in the world, you will observe the same phenomenon. Groups of youngsters making believe. Darting about as aliens, swaggering around on a pirate ship or leaping over logs as if they are horses, children love to make things up. There is a creative spirit deep-rooted in the human psyche, which yearns for just this kind of spontaneous fun. Yet somehow, as we 'grow up', the increasing demands on us to plan and prepare not only limit our opportunities for spontaneity, but reinforce a belief that to ad-lib or behave impulsively is less worthwhile.

Perhaps, in some walks of life, this is the case. But theatre is a live performance art and relies on a sense of immediacy and imaginative freedom, which is born out of extemporisation. The children in the park were not recreating stories they had been told. They were making things up, on the spot. They were devising. The joy of make-believe is its lack of constraints; a story that begins on a pirate ship might equally as well end on the moon as it might in the discovery of treasure.

Children find endless amusement in the act of improvisation, so it makes sense that if we strive to create entertaining theatre, we should follow suit. There is something profoundly satisfying about creating a story from scratch, and often plays developed within an inventive and supportive environment reflect this, to their benefit.

This book explores the devising process and looks at how to foster imaginative freedom in a rehearsal room, in order to create work that is organic, original and dynamic.

Hammertime!

A nod to MC Hammer's popular '90s hit, 'U Can't Touch This', this is a quick-fire version of a circular warm-up game. It's Hammertime!

How to Play

This game requires players to pass the energy around the circle. This particular game is enjoyable because it encourages everyone to 'bust some moves' and celebrate the best of '90s pop. If you don't know the song, look up the video on YouTube and you will understand the game immediately!

Players stand in a circle. Begin by passing a 'Na!' around the circle to the left. To do this, simply swing your arm across your body, as if moving to the beat, saying 'Na!' as you do so. You may choose to listen to the original track for inspiration ('Na na na na, na na, na na, can't touch this!'). Pass this movement energetically from player to player all the way around the circle for practice. You must always swing your arm across your body in the direction the 'Na!' is travelling in.

Now introduce the second rule. To change the direction of the 'Na!', you say 'Rewind' (think Ali G), whilst making a pointing gesture back in the direction that the 'Na!' came from. This sends the 'Na!' back the other way.

To pass the 'Na!' across the circle, gesture to someone on the other side of the ring, sticking your arm out towards them making a stopping gesture, hand out, and say 'Can't touch this!' Make it clear who you are aiming at, so they can then pass the 'Na!' round.

Once you have mastered these rules, you can add others for more advanced players. Firstly, to skip a player, say 'Pump up the volume!', pushing your arms up in the air. The 'Na!' skips your neighbour and passes to the next person in the circle.

Secondly, you can cause the whole circle to break up, move around and reconvene. When it is your turn, say 'Break it down', crossing your arms over your head. At this point, everyone dances around, swapping places, singing the musical break from 'U Can't Touch This' (the 'Oh, oh ohs' leading up to

'Hammertime!'), whilst everyone changes positions and reforms the circle in a different order. Whoever shouted 'Break it down' then begins the next 'Na!' to avoid losing the momentum.

Thirdly, you can throw in the wild card. When the 'Na!' comes to you, you can say 'Stop!', making a gesture with palm facing down, as if pushing down. Anyone can snatch the 'Na!' by making a grabbing gesture and saying 'Hammertime!', before then passing the 'Na!' on in the conventional method. This is an amusing way to add a little competitiveness, as whoever is quickest gets to carry on.

The Aim of the Game

This game encourages a high level of focus, requires memory skills and gives everyone an opportunity to have a dance!

Variations and Extensions

This game could easily be reworked with any other song. For younger players something from the current charts is certainly one way to play to their own interests.

Developing a Movement Vocabulary

This version of the game originated when I was devising a new play with students at East 15 Drama School. Their production opened in a 1990's rave. I adapted the game from the original *Zip, Zap, Zoom!* to set the tone for rehearsals and to get us thinking about an appropriate movement vocabulary for the period. You could therefore do the same for any other production. For a Noël Coward play, for instance, you could use Charleston moves and lyrics from songs of the era. Or, for a play set in the sixties, like Amanda Whittington's *Be My Baby*, you could use gestures and words from songs like 'Going to the Chapel', which both develops a textural world for rehearsal and encourages a consideration of the characters' aspirations and interests.

Players

6+

Skills

Energy, Focus, Confidence,
Speed, Awareness

Impro Bingo

A quick-fire improvisation game that encourages players to create characters spontaneously, with an element of chance thrown in for fun! This game was developed by students at Central School of Speech and Drama.

How to Play

On a piece of paper, draw a chart with five columns and five rows, numbering the columns A to D and the rows 1 to 4.

Write character types down the first column, as shown in the diagram opposite, and activities across the top row. For the simplest method of gameplay, you can stop at this point, without writing any further information into the table.

Now ask two actors to take to the floor, let's call them Harry and Rebecca. Ask a member of the audience to choose a letter between A and D for Harry; for instance C, which is 'Painting'. Ask another audience member to choose a number between 1 and 4; for instance 4, which is 'Convict'. Harry must immediately begin improvising a convict who is painting. Repeat this process for your second actor, so that both actors have a character and an activity. After letting them settle in to their improvisations, choose an appropriate point to say 'Go!' At this point, the two actors have to meld their scenes together, finding a way to make sense of these two contrasting characters coexisting within a scene. For instance, Harry, the painting convict, might be painting a picture of Rebecca, a magician who is stealing some spells (A1). They must do this without conversing, naturally creating a shared scenario. This is a challenge, but tests their abilities to work imaginatively with the random choices they have been allocated.

For a slightly more complex version of this game, you can add emotions in the boxes in the centre of the table. This gives the actors the added factor of a feeling or motivation within their scene. Harry, who was given C4, must thoughtfully paint Rebecca's magician, who is ambitiously stealing a whole book of spells.

Fill in the table with your own words. Be inventive; you can easily choose activities and characters that relate to a theme you are exploring.

	A Stealing	B Gardening	C Painting	D Eating
1 Magician	Ambitiously	Nervously	Tenderly	Joyfully
2 Baker	Provocatively	Scathingly	Sadly	Skillfully
3 Runaway	Gently	Cheekily	Jealously	Hopefully
4 Convict	Sensually	Angrily	Thoughtfully	Cunningly

The Aim of the Game

This exercise encourages imagination and spontaneity. By giving the actors randomly selected characters you avoid the temptation to match obvious combinations – if asked to play a convict in a scene, it is unlikely you would have chosen to portray him painting thoughtfully. It is therefore an engaging way to begin exploring three-dimensional characterisations, moving away from conventional stereotypes.

It also encourages actors to work together with immediacy, using their creative skills to create unusual scenes, without the common afflictions of planning and discussions!

+ Paper, pen, list of ideas

Players

4+

Skills

Storytelling, Characterisation,
Quick Thinking