

Thomasina Unsworth

drama games

FOR ACTORS

Exploring Self, Character and Text

Foreword by Richard Eyre

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NICK HERN BOOKS

London

www.nickhernbooks.co.uk

FOREWORD

Most of us have an indecent curiosity about what other people do in private. Sex and tax, for instance: ‘What do you do in bed?’ and ‘How much do you earn?’ are the questions that underlie all profile journalism and most biography. My own particular corner of prurience concerns the working habits of directors: I’m inordinately fascinated by what they are. Directors are not very gregarious creatures, at least among their own kind, and if you were to search for a collective noun for them it would probably be a ‘solitude’. When we do gather together, we’re wary of discussing each other’s work, and warier still of asking how it was achieved. Rehearsals are a private province; no one likes to be observed, so it’s hard to see enough to imitate, even if you have a model to follow.

Directors are often self-effacing, often surprisingly lacking in the gift and appetite for self-promotion, and, in spite of a high estimation of their own importance, are often reluctant to capitalise on it by making public pronouncements on their craft. It’s all the odder therefore that directors occupy such an elevated status in contemporary mythology, often, like conductors, placed somewhere between the maestro and the magus, when in fact they’re more like teachers or doctors. If there’s one thing I’ve learned it’s that it’s better to be more like the pupil or the patient than the teacher or the doctor. The mistake is to pretend that you have all the answers.

Which is one of the reasons that I’m consistently reluctant to recommend my ‘process’ to any director, and suspicious of any young director who asks to be an assistant of mine in order to learn about it. If I chose to rationalise the way I work I suppose it would amount to a ‘process’, but it is so

idiosyncratic and personal that I wouldn't dignify it with that description.

A rehearsal has to be a time when actors can experiment, invent, explore, discuss, dispute, practise and play, and it is the job of a director to create a world – private and secure – where this activity can go on without fear of failure. There is no method that guarantees a good rehearsal. It's as hard to know why some highly articulate, learned and intelligent directors seem unable to animate a cast of actors, as it is to understand how the same orchestra can be inspired by some conductors but seem commonplace in the hands of others.

If you ask me, 'What do you need to be a director?' I'd have to say this: you need to be somehow assertive and yet self-effacing, to be dogged and yet pliable, to be demanding and yet supportive. And if this sounds like a prescription for a perfect marriage partner, it's because directors are ever hopeful of making a successful marriage of actor and character, of text and design, of play and audience, so perhaps, if they look hesitant, doubtful, and diffident, it's because they know just how difficult it is – as in real life – to make a marriage work.

And if you ask me, 'How do you learn to be a director?' I'd recommend a poem called 'Garden Hints' by Douglas Dunn, which begins with the line: 'Only a garden can teach gardening.' Directing is like that: only working with actors in a rehearsal room can offer a real insight into the craft.

The start of most rehearsals resembles others more than it differs from them. Rehearsals have to begin somewhere – usually it's a meeting of the cast and a reading of the play. The director stands like a heron, rigid with anxiety, talks a little – or a lot, depending on temperament – and his or her words drift like incense over a group of actors who, regardless of their mutual familiarity, are united only in their nervous anticipation and social unease. It never works to give the actors – who are always numbed to deafness by nerves – a lengthy lecture about the background to the play and its meaning: it doesn't encourage actors to be made to feel that the director holds all the cards and they hold none.

So how do you start rehearsals? It's always a problem: how do you get a disparate set of individuals to work as an ensemble within a few days? British actors are good at this, but you still have to find means of mutual familiarisation, ways in which they can legitimately sniff each other out. I change my approach for each production. Sometimes we just sit around a table and I encourage everyone, regardless of experience and size of part, to talk about the play, about their parts, about themselves. Sometimes we do physical and vocal exercises. Sometimes we do improvisations connected with the play. And sometimes we even play games – and many of them are in this book. Thomasina Unsworth gives you a mass of invaluable ideas for drama exercises for all ages and all types of actors, amateur or professional. It's hard to imagine anyone involved in theatre who wouldn't find it useful.

Richard Eyre

Richard Eyre is a theatre, opera, television and film director and writer. He was Artistic Director of the National Theatre from 1988 to 1997, where his productions included Guys and Dolls, Richard III, King Lear, Racing Demon, Skylight, The Invention of Love and Vincent in Brixton. His other theatre work includes Amy's View, Mary Poppins, Private Lives, Betty Blue Eyes, Mr Foote's Other Leg, and his own versions of Hedda Gabler, Ghosts and Little Eyolf. His films include Tumbledown, Iris, Notes on a Scandal, Henry IV, Parts 1 and 2 and The Dresser. He has published four books, including National Service, a journal of his time at the National, which won the Theatre Book Prize. He has received many awards for theatre, television and film, was knighted in 1997, and became a Companion of Honour in 2017.

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INTRODUCTION

This is a book of games and exercises, collected over the years, to be used as a source of ideas and inspiration for actors – and those teaching or directing them.

It is not a recipe book, which, if followed to the letter, will result in perfectly cooked acting. These exercises will shift and alter through your experiences of engaging with them. They are derived from a variety of sources and have been used and developed through the course of my work. It is expected that you, the reader, will play with them too. Find elements that help, excite or interest you, and then build on them, take them further, or in a different direction altogether. Some of the games are simple and basic, others are more complex, but all of them will, I hope, serve as a foundation for your own creativity.

I have grouped the exercises into three sections for clarity, but in essence you will find many overlaps. The first chapter, **Self**, provides you with games and exercises to deepen relaxation, sharpen focus, lift energy, expand imagination and help the group to work collaboratively. The second chapter, **Character**, offers exercises to aid you in the process of transformation, encouraging you to explore characteristics that are distinct from your own. Finally, the third section, **Text**, outlines exercises to unlock the words, allowing free and imaginative work within the structure of a script, without losing specificity.

I have addressed some exercises directly to the actor, in order to engage the reader more immediately. You will notice these shifts between the point of view of the facilitator and the actor; the role of the group leader should, however, be clear throughout.

I hope you will enjoy exploring the games and exercises contained here. I owe a huge debt of gratitude to the many and various practitioners that have inspired me and provided me with guidance over the years. Thank goodness for people who value acting and drama, who strive to unlock the creative process of an artist. Without them this world would be a darker, colder place.

Thomasina Unsworth

PART ONE

SELF

The aim of Part One is to provide tools for actors to develop their ability to relax, focus, concentrate, imagine, and to work as a group. These exercises are collected together here because they can be explored without reference to either character or text. Some are simply about having fun and getting energised; others will require connection on a much deeper level.

The exercises are ordered in such a way that they begin with solo explorations, move on to work done in pairs, and then to games involving a group.

Mirroring

Face your partner. You can sit or stand in front of each other.

Label yourselves A and B. Player A commits to a slow and clear movement. For example, he or she reaches up with their left arm.

Player B should copy this precisely and the movement will be repeated between both players until Player A decides to change it. Now A might slowly extend both arms outwards in a gesture that is wide and open. B will copy this and the movement will continue until Player A decides to change it.

Maintain eye contact at all times, and make sure that the movements are simple and clear. You can use music during this exercise and, if you do, it can influence the gestures that you choose.

Once this process has been established, you should arrive at a situation where neither player initiates the movement. Each of you mirrors the other person, but in such a way that anyone observing would be unable to tell which player is moving and which is copying. It should simply flow between you, changing organically as you become increasingly in tune with the person opposite you.

You can move around, but you must not lose eye contact. You should never over-complicate what you are doing so that your partner is unable to mirror you accurately – you are not trying to catch the other person out!

+ Music (optional)

Time

15+

Skills

*Awareness, Collaboration,
Control, Responsiveness*