

# Raising the Curtain

Activities for the Theatre Arts Classroom

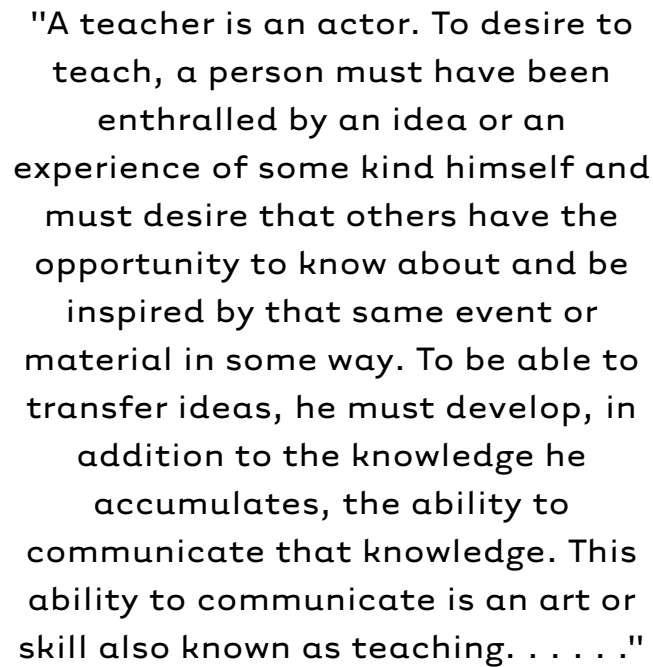
*Gai Jones*



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# Introduction



"A teacher is an actor. To desire to teach, a person must have been enthralled by an idea or an experience of some kind himself and must desire that others have the opportunity to know about and be inspired by that same event or material in some way. To be able to transfer ideas, he must develop, in addition to the knowledge he accumulates, the ability to communicate that knowledge. This ability to communicate is an art or skill also known as teaching. . . . ."

from *A Teacher Is Many Things*,  
Earl V. Pullias and James.D. Young

If you are reading this book, you probably don't have to be told how important arts education is. You already know that students who take arts courses usually have higher SAT scores than most and that they also have a heightened ability to "think outside the box."

But you also know that test scores and higher level thinking skills are only a portion of what the arts, and theatre in particular, offer students. Theatre classes can help students find themselves and their place in the world. To my mind, the arts engage students of all levels and interests as no other area of the curriculum can. Theatre teaches skills such as observation, analysis, interpretation, and evaluation, while also encouraging students to stand up and physically, vocally, and emotionally apply these skills to create their own art.

Theatre students learn to be self-motivated, creative, and analytical. They must embrace cultural literacy and cooperative learning in order to find success and meaning. They work with a wide range of people doing multiple tasks to accomplish a single goal—a theatre event (in all its varied splendor).

I often quiet a noisy classroom by saying, “If you can hear me, say, ‘I love the theatre.’” This technique sets the tone and gains the focus of my very verbal, outgoing theatre students. Such attention-getting devices are important to any teacher, but this particular phrase lets students know that in my class they are learning something that is very important to me . . . and that I hope will be important to them also. As a theatre educator, I hope to help my students become empowered with the joy the theatre offers. I strive to create an ensemble of students all of whom feel included, important, and valued. The importance of creating and maintaining an ensemble atmosphere in the classroom cannot be overemphasized.

The guidelines, activities, tips, thoughts, and quotes I offer in this book can be used with all students—beginner to advanced. The National Theatre Standards that are reflected in each chapter are listed for you in that chapter’s introduction. It is my hope that *Raising the Curtain* will prove to be a practical, engaging, and easy-to-facilitate resource for you and that it will offer your students training for a future that will always include the theatre.

Gai Jones





- occasions for all faculty members of the arts department to work with theatre students
- cocurricular activities for those who are in theatre classes and those who are not, with scheduling that allows students to participate in play production activities
- experience in performing for various audiences using material from various playwrights, genres, and styles and different media
- information about the numerous avocational and vocational opportunities in the theatre
- the opportunity to work in at least three productions a year
- participation in theatre festivals for professional adjudication
- a children's theatre production presented annually
- adequate equipment, materials, storage, and facilities for both classes and productions
- theatre space under the control of the theatre teacher, with guaranteed availability
- appropriate class size of 20–25 or less
- programs accessible to handicapped participants and audience members
- video capabilities for student self-evaluation
- support for attending college and state theatre activities, teacher conferences, and other activities outside the local area
- opportunities for students to attend performances by community and professional theatres, colleges, and other schools
- a sequential pre-kindergarten through grade 12 program by theatre teachers from all grades
- a varied curriculum and a variety of courses ranging from basic to advanced, in theatre crafts, theatre arts I–IV, and technical theatre I and II
- a comprehensive theatre arts curriculum guide for each course
- textbooks, reference books, periodicals, scripts, and recording devices for student use
- support for the implementation of contemporary scripts



Educational theatre involves teaching basic life skills. By stimulating creative thinking and problem solving, we can show students how to conceptualize and execute ideas. I also try to impart the importance of commitment, cooperative work, and goal setting. As a mentor, I have a responsibility to integrate sound principles into my teaching. I strive to provide students with sensible values that will help them grow and develop into happy, productive adults.

You will find, as I have over the years, that students will come to you for advice or help about their life experiences as well as their theatre experiences. I always try to listen without passing judgment. If I can, I offer what I see as options or choices. If I can't help, I try to find the best help available to the student. I am always aware that young people are impressionable and that theatre students may be even more sensitive than most others. Be aware at all times that your opinions, advice, or criticism can influence the way a student feels about your class, theatre in general, the world beyond school, and even himself or herself.

## Helping Your Beginning Students

New students, no matter what age, will flourish with the guidance of an animated, disciplined teacher. Help your students relax by making them feel that they are among supportive people. Acting means taking risks. Actors can't be expected to work unless they feel they are in a safe environment. Begin each class or session with a short warm-up and end with positive remarks. Here are a few helpful suggestions.

- See that your students are at ease and have emotional support. Actors can't be expected to dig deep and expose what they find unless they feel they are safe and secure. Respect their work and let them know you do.

## Seven Reasons to Take a Theatre Class

- 1. Theatre builds self-confidence.** According to *Psychology Today* magazine, speaking in front of people is the number-one fear of most Americans. We call it "stage fright." Everyone has it. Working in a theatre class can help overcome that fear. In the theatre, everyone deals with it.
- 2. Theatre teaches group dynamics.** Theatre is a communal experience. It is the kind of work that involves taking responsibility, interacting with others, solving problems creatively, and accepting team challenges. In theatre, the whole is greater than the sum of its parts.
- 3. Theatre nurtures grace under pressure.** All theatrical productions are, in effect, mini-corporations targeted toward the completion of a project within a specific time frame and budget. Deadlines, personality clashes, and frustrations are a given—they must be handled gracefully.
- 4. Theatre develops specific tangible skills.** Among these skills are voice training, movement, carpentry, painting, drafting, engineering, architecture, sewing, interior design, makeup and hair design, pyrotechnics, stage combat, and much more.
- 5. Theatre offers a liberal education.** In the theatre, you work with everything you've got—mind, body, and heart. Theatre calls for them all to function as one.
- 6. Theatre fosters creativity.** It is a chance to dream and live in a different time and space. One enters an imaginary world and escapes the realities of everyday life for a brief time.
- 7. Finally, theatre is the roar of the crowd and the smell of the greasepaint.** It is an experience in which to revel, to learn, and to grow.

Based on the work of Daniel L. Patterson, Associate Professor of Theatre at Keene State College, and Whit Andrews, Executive Director of The Little Theatre of Winston-Salem, NC.

## Helping Your Beginning Students *(continued)*

- Begin the class with relaxation exercises and a warm-up. Before giving a student one constructive criticism, offer two compliments. Otherwise, the student may only hear the criticism.
- Don't overlook the student's weaknesses. These are as important to address as his or her strengths.
- It may be helpful for actors to watch the work of other students, but it's counterproductive to spend most of the class time that way.
- Have students work in a group or in pairs as much as is reasonable.
- Encourage students to share their work openly and gladly. You will, of course, want them to perform rehearsed sections for feedback from classmates and constructive criticism from you, but this should not be an onerous task.
- Expect students to do script and character analysis at home. Challenge them to come to each session prepared, so that everyone can move forward.
- Work every scene at least twice. Give the students the chance to incorporate your notes during rehearsals.
- At first, give actors roles related to themselves in age and temperament.
- Isolate problems and address them. Help the students with the basics of reading, character creation, and voice and body projection.
- The class work we create as theatre teachers is as helpful to students as stage work. It's important to keep that in mind as we work with students at all levels.

## Students with Learning Difficulties

When asked to do a cold reading, many students feel less than adequate, but students with reading difficulties, dyslexia in particular, are often overwhelmed. The techniques below often prove helpful for such students when using unrehearsed material.

- Scan the script quickly.
- Answer the following questions about the character portrayed:
  - Who is the character?
  - What is the location for the material?
  - To whom or about whom is the character speaking?
  - How is the character feeling at the beginning of the selection?
  - How does the character feel at the end of the selection?
- Pick out any repeated key words that suggest a theme.
- Make a note of any unfamiliar word. If the director is available, ask for a definition (and pronunciation). If not, try to determine the definition from context or look it up in a dictionary later.
- Make bold choices for a vibrant character.

## Students with Learning Difficulties *(continued)*

- Find the high point or climax of the material—when the character’s objective is realized.
- Pronounce each word with confidence. If you make a mistake, make it so confidently that it seems correct.
- Quickly try to memorize the gist of your first and last lines to get a feel for your character’s place in the story. Infuse these lines with emotion.

Share with students the names and accomplishments of famous people with learning difficulties. A list of such people, The Dyslexia Hall of Fame, appears at the end of this chapter on page 15. Post it for all to see and encourage students to add names to the list as they discover them.

## The Learning Index

For the most part, working in the theatre involves the elements listed in the box at the right. Therefore, theatre strengthens one’s abilities to read and understand, to listen, to observe, to speak, and to act.

### We Learn...

- 10% of what we READ
- 20% of what we HEAR
- 30% of what we SEE
- 50% of what we SEE & HEAR
- 70% of what we SAY
- 90% of what we SAY and DO

## Students and Memorization

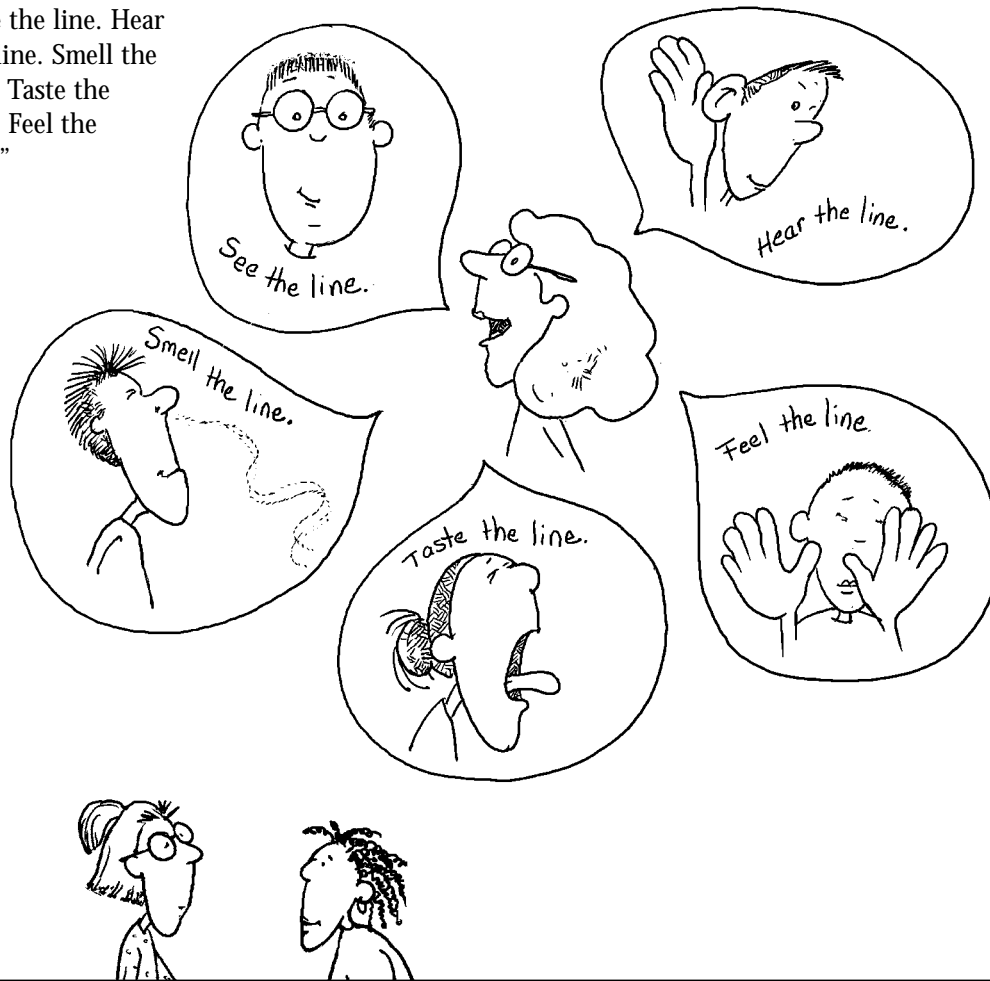
Many students find the idea of memorizing lines daunting. Below are some simple ideas you might offer to help in the process.

1. Tell students they have to memorize the character’s lines so that they don’t have to think about them.
2. Have them memorize short blocks of lines. Use small units of text that coincide with beats or changes of the character’s motivation or objectives. The actor can memorize one unit before going to another. Have them recite these units in class.
3. Ask students to paraphrase the lines in their own words.
4. Encourage them to rehearse and rehearse out loud in order to really hear the lines. This helps the body internalize the lines also. Just as we learn to catch a ball without thinking about it, we can learn to say a character’s lines instinctively.

The age-old question asked of the actor is “How do you remember all those lines?” The answer is “By forgetting everything else.”

## Meditation

Many actors believe that quiet meditation before working on lines helps clear the mind. Meditation after the study of lines helps the actor visualize performing the scene. The more senses involved in memorization, the quicker the mastery of the lines. Tell students to  
“See the line. Hear the line. Smell the line. Taste the line. Feel the line.”



### Teacher to Teacher: Take Your Time

It is imperative that we embrace the similarities between a therapeutic process and the acting process and that we honor students' individual processes by validating their feelings. We must show patience with the students' inability to get in touch with specific emotions. Time must be provided for students to process their feelings and to take in performance assessment.

## Getting Parents Involved

Your most important and effective advocate can be the parent or guardian who understands and supports what you are doing in theatre class. I do all I can to promote and sustain communication with parents by making phone calls, sending e-mails, and writing formal and informal letters. I also write and send a monthly newsletter. I often include information on the following.

- my expectations for the month and my eagerness to work with parents and guardians on any relevant issue
- required work related to the curriculum due that month
- extra-credit opportunities related to the activities that month
- a calendar of theatre arts activities in the classroom, school, and community
- after-school rehearsal schedules
- office hours
- additional educational theatre activities for that month (or upcoming summer months)
- theatre scholarship opportunities (if available)

On page 16, you will find a sample letter I send to students and guardians. Feel free to use it or adapt it as you see fit.

## The Contract of Expectations

On the first day of the semester or session, I hand out to each student a Student Contract like the one found on page 17. I ask that each of my students take it home and share it with parents or guardians. Then both the student and the parent or guardian sign the contract and the student returns it to me. Should a student start to renege on any item covered by the contract, you should discuss it immediately. In rare cases, a contract may be amended. Tailor the requirements to fit your circumstances.

## The Student Calendar

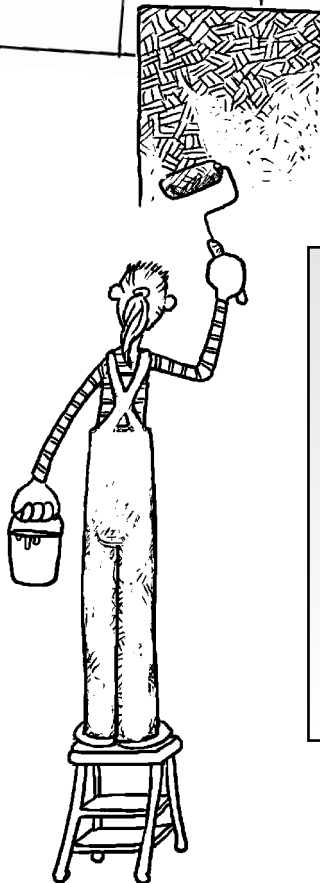
I require that each student in my class has a “theatre calendar.” It helps the active theatre student balance his or her life and the requirements of theatre classes and performances. It makes the student’s life more manageable, and it makes families happier. The students may bring day planners, create a handmade calendar, or use the blank monthly calendar that I provide. Each Monday we cover the theatre dates for the week, and I expect all students to mark these dates on their calendars.

## The Student Calendar (continued)

I also give my students a calendar published by the school's theatre department. This calendar includes required curriculum-related activities and extra credit activities.

# September

Sun.	Mon.	Tues.	Wed.	Thurs	Fri	Sat.
					1	2
3	4	5	6 Thespian monthly meeting @ noon	7	8	9
10	11	12	13 Encore Club noon	14 Mime club New members noon	15	16 Dramathon 3-9 All students
17	18 Improv Group 4-6	19	20	21	22	23
24	25	26	27 3-5 All School Auditions	28 Stage Crews noon	29 All School Production Hello Dolly! 7:30	30



### Teacher to Student: Practice Makes Perfect

Stress to students the spelling of the word *rehearsal*—"re" and "hear" are two important syllables in the word. We must re-hear, re-say, and re-do in order to polish a performance. Students should not think that repetition is synonymous with failure and that the only reason an activity should be repeated is if it was done incorrectly. Repetition makes perfect.

After a short exercise, I often try to have students choose a particular part and rehearse it.

## Theatre Scavenger Hunt

One of the first things I have my students do is get to know the materials we will be using in the classroom. It is important for the safety and knowledge of the students that they can quickly locate and use various items. We go on a scavenger hunt and track down the locations of these items. Then we discuss how each item is used. Following is a possible list of items.

bandages	antiseptic	cold compresses	fire extinguishers
tissue	light switches	keys	phone book/numbers
sink	paper cups	refrigerator	pins (straight and safety)
computer	masking tape	markers	envelopes
glue	hammer/nails	sponges	broom/dustpan
paint	brushes	gum remover	pencil sharpener
call board	calendar	tape, DVD, or CD player	checkout slips (costume/props)

## Your Theatre Library

Developing a library of play scripts for leisure reading, festival monologues, scene selection, and script analysis is an important part of your ongoing classroom development. Discuss with students how you arrange the scripts, by author or by genre. Arranging scripts or books of plays by genre, such as comedy, drama, children's, musicals, and one-acts, is probably easiest for the student. Show them how to check out a script or book by filling out the slip and putting it into a nearby box. Go through the box periodically to keep track of the library items that have been checked out.

You will find a few theatre library checkout forms on page 18. Feel free to reproduce these for use in your classroom library.

## Reading Scripts

Each month, have students check out a play or script from the school library or your theatre library. One or two volunteers should then give a short report on the play they read. Each student must volunteer at least once during the course of the year. Refer students to page 19 of this book, where they will find the Script Report sheet. Also encourage students to read the plays listed in the article Plays All Seniors Should Know, found on page 309 of chapter 9.

### Teacher to Student: Copyright Infringement

Share with students any guidelines your school has published regarding plagiarism and copyright infringement. Talk with students about how to avoid these two common pitfalls. They must never pass off another's ideas, words, or writing as their own. They must always use quotes and attribute phrases, sentences, and paragraphs to those who first wrote them.

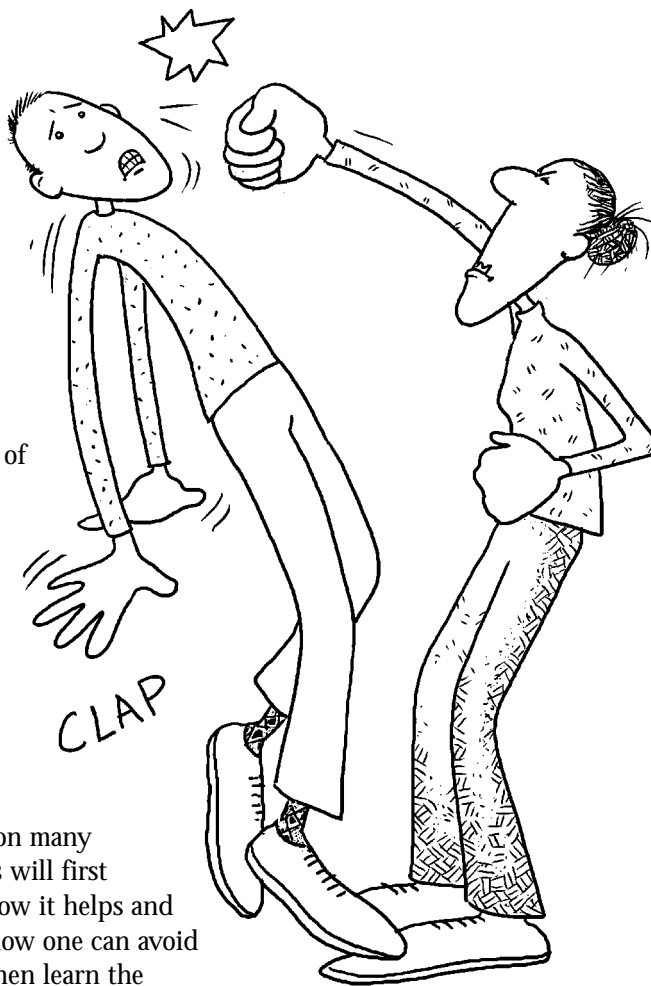
Copyright holdings are important to consider when thinking about producing a play. The school must receive permission for performing a play that is copyrighted. This often involves paying a fee for the use of the script. Fees are sometimes based on the number of ticket sales anticipated and the cost of each ticket.

# Stage Fright, Stage Right, and the Stage Fight

**P**erforming in front of their peers presents many challenges to students—novice or veteran. Often they experience the “What ifs.” “What if they find me ridiculous?” “What if I mess up?” “What if I freeze and can’t remember the words or where to move?” Being onstage is, for most of us, exciting, challenging, and exhilarating, but it can also be frightening, confusing, and exhausting. Putting oneself at ease on the stage can be learned through practice, however. And learning the fundamentals of proper movement, stance, attitude, and gesture will also help.

In this chapter we will work on many aspects of being onstage. Students will first tackle the issue of stage fright—how it helps and how it hinders performance and how one can avoid being overcome by it. They will then learn the important theatre terminology dealing with stage areas and stage movement, and they will practice what most students enjoy tremendously, the art of stage fighting.

The activities and tips in this chapter should help students of all abilities achieve success in onstage performances. They meet National Theatre Standards 2, 4, and 5. We have a lot to cover, so let’s get started!

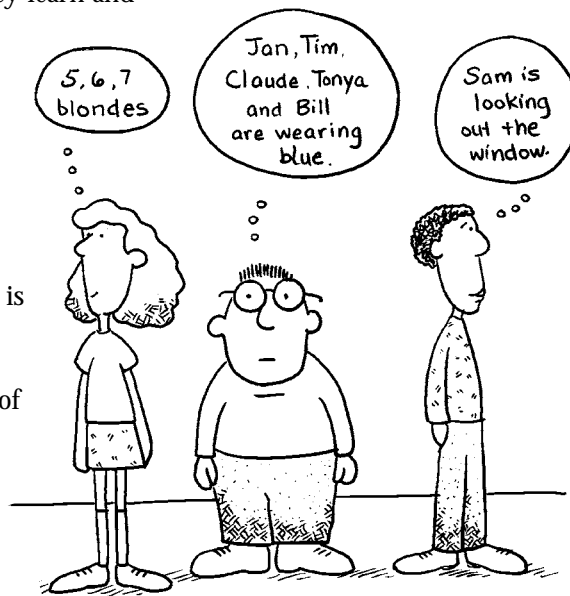


## Activities to Build Proficiency

Many of the new students in your drama class may feel uneasy or confused at first when asked to take the stage. The activities that follow will help them ease into performance. First they will simply learn how to relax and stay focused onstage. Then they learn and practice various techniques for overcoming stage fright.

### Taking the Stage

This activity helps the student get used to being in front of a group. The time frame for this experience is fifteen minutes. During the first days of the session, have five students stand onstage or in front of class members who act as the audience.



- Direct the audience to sit and observe, silently, attentively, and politely.
- Direct the five students to stand comfortably onstage for approximately one minute.
- After one minute, whisper a focus item in each student's ear. Examples to use might be:
  - Count the number of blonds in the audience.
  - Observe how many audience members are looking out the window.
  - Observe the number of people wearing the color blue (or other common color).
  - Count the number of times a certain person blinks or moves.
- After about two minutes, ask the audience to discuss any changes they noticed in the performers after you whispered to them.
- Encourage the performers to verbalize how they felt after they were given a focus.



## A Look at Stage Fright

Being asked to speak or perform in front of others will often elicit the fight or flight response in most of us. The body's normal physical reaction to a situation that seems potentially harmful is to either run away or assume a combat mode. For many of us, the urge to run away is strong when standing alone on a stage. You will have to remind students over and over again that this feeling is normal and natural. Actors learn how to use it to their advantage.

Share with students your own experiences with stage fright. Then, with the students, read the Stage Fright Information Sheet found on page 145.

Ask the following questions:

- Which of these symptoms have you experienced when onstage?
- Which do you think are the most embarrassing?
- Which ones are the easiest to combat?
- Are there any that you feel help you give an exciting performance?

Ask students to talk about their actual experiences.

## A Laugh at Stage Fright

Have students count off from 1 through 9. Then ask them to read the corresponding number on the Stage Fright Information Sheet on page 145. Each student will read a short, familiar rhyme or poem while illustrating the element of stage fright that corresponds to their number. Suggest such poems as "I Have a Little Shadow" or such rhymes as "Peter, Peter, Pumpkin Eater."

- Give students a chance to exchange assigned numbers if they so desire.
- Instruct students to be as flamboyant and exuberant as possible in their portrayals of the symptom they are representing. This is intended to be a comic send-up of stage fright.
- Call each number in order, 1 through 9 (repeat the numbers after 9 has been presented).
- When everyone has completed their send-up, discuss the results.

### Teacher to Student: Anything but That!

Most people surveyed would rather encounter a venomous snake, drop from a parachute, face an intruder, or be stuck in an elevator for hours than give a speech to more than 50 people. Most everyone finds public performance nerve-wracking. We all fret, worry, and feel real fear. The trick is to learn to harness these feelings.



## **It's So Scary Onstage: Cure #1**

Discuss the first cause of stage fright found in the Stage Fright: Causes and Cures chart on page 145.

- Direct students to stand and think the following phrases:  
Share with the audience.  
Visualize the most accepting person you know sitting in the audience.
- Give the actors a simple action that involves the complete body, such as “Build a pantomime sand castle.” Tell the students to be involved in the action of the character and all the small details involved in the action.
- Ask students to share other techniques they have used or heard about to overcome fear.

## **What Should I Do with My Body?: Cure #2**

Continue referring to the Stage Fright: Causes and Cures chart. Share with students the idea that many young actors think acting involves only the mouth and hands. Once they understand the objectives of their characters, they realize the importance of becoming involved physically and using the entire body to work toward the characters' objectives.

- Direct the students to stand.
- Tell them to jump a pantomime rope twenty times. Tell each actor, “You are extremely tired, but your objective is to jump as high as you can (or as accurately as you can).”
- Have students pantomime their jumps again. This time their objective is to create an innovative way to jump.
- Compliment the creative approaches to jumping, and then ask students for their own ideas about using physical involvement and motivation to overcome stage fright.

## **Where Do I Stand? How Do I Move?: Cure #3**

Refer again to the chart on page 145. Tell students that awkward stage movement is often the result of a lack of direction. Involvement with the action helps overcome awkwardness. Sometimes actors forget there are levels of body positions, such as kneeling, standing on something, or turning the back to make a point, that enhance their character's motivation and add to the visual picture onstage. Additionally, the use of gestures should always be natural and in character rather than forced afterthoughts.

- Give the actors a direction to stand still, keeping the weight on the balls of the feet, with feet approximately eight inches apart (so that the weight is equal on both feet). Arms should hang naturally to the sides.

## Problem Areas for the Actor

If you see an actor doing any of the following, there's a good chance he or she is experiencing stage fright. These are problem areas that can be worked on and improved through the suggested remedies (and a bit of practice). Share these with your students.

If the actor...	Perhaps he or she should...
does not know what to do with the hands	relax them gently straight down or employ them in an activity the character would naturally do.
shifts the feet nervously or paces aimlessly	relax and stay in character; work on appropriate types of movement with the director.
speaks mechanically or rapidly	be sure the character's lines are fully memorized and internalized and can be spoken naturally; work on feeling the character's emotions.
is hard to understand and can't be heard	work on proper enunciation and projection; be sure the motivations and feelings of the character are fully understood.
mouths the words of fellow actors	listen to the other actors as though hearing their words for the first time and concentrating on responding as the character.
says the lines too early or too late	work on proper timing; this can be improved with practice.
is overly emotional or enthusiastic	focus on the character's personality—if this isn't an emotional or enthusiastic character, pull back and get into character.
forgets stage directions	talk to the director and work out movements that seem appropriate to the character; then PRACTICE.
does not look at other actors	look directly into the eyes of actors who are speaking; when addressing others, look at them as your character would; when not being addressed specifically, stay in the action and remain focused on the speakers
looks at the audience too much	stay in character and only look at the audience if addressing them as the character; look at fellow actors and stay focused on the scene at hand.

If you feel the students need to, go over the Stage Fright: Causes and Cures chart found on page 145 once again. Also hand out the sheets on page 146 and 147. Then have students, in turn, choose one of the problem areas above. Next, give the students a scene to perform in which they work on the problem area.

## The Basic Slap (Take That!)

Stage slaps are difficult to fake. While the stage slap must be convincing, it must never hurt the victim. The two actors stand in profile to the audience. The key lies with the person receiving the slap. He or she must react with quick timing to the slapper's movements.

**Inflicting the Slap** The person doing the slapping must look angry, with the muscles tensed as the slap is given. He or she must be sure that the receiver of the slap is ready for the attack.

**Reacting to the Slap** The person being slapped raises the hand, palm toward the slapper as though in self defense. Just as the slap is given, the two palms are clapped at the point of the blow. This must be done quickly and hidden from the audience's view. The reactor turns away from the slap and from the audience, reacts verbally, and touches the face.

- Divide the actors into groups of two: male and female. Try not to place two males together.
- Direct the taller of the two actors to say the following cue line: "I can't stand people who lie to me!" Then in slow motion, guide the rehearsal of the fake slap and the clapped response and any verbal and physical reactions by the slapped actor.
- Rehearse three or four more times. On each rehearsal, direct the actors to speed up the slap and reaction, until the fake slap is in real time.
- Reverse the roles of slapper and slapped; give a new cue for the rehearsal, such as "I think you need to be taught a lesson!"
- Remember to have students rehearse as many times as needed. Each time, increase the speed of the slap and the reaction.

## Another Variation of the Slap

In this variation, the actor receiving the slap places the hand close to the body with fingertips at the chin. The actor giving the slap does so with the hand and follows through with the motion. After the actor has given the slap to the receiver's palm, the target hand drops straight down.

- Direct two actors to be partners in this exercise, letting the shorter of the two execute the stunt first.
- The shorter actor, Actor 1, says the cue line, "I think people who eat oatmeal (or some kind of breakfast food) deserve a fake slap."
- The slapper rehearses a slow-motion fake forehand slap.
- Actor 2, the taller actor, gives a verbal reaction sound and says the cue line, "Oh yeah, if you ate oatmeal, then you would be as great as me," and delivers another slow-motion slap.