

Intermediate/Advanced Improvisation

Point of Concentration: Emotion in Scenework

This outline covers the exercises in a single class (90 minutes) of an advanced improvisation course. Because of the level of complexity, beginning students might struggle with some of the content.

Warmup

Stretch/Physical Warmup

Pass the Sound and Movement

- In a circle, each student sends a sound and movement to the person to their right. That student's job is to pass the same sound and movement to the next person, repeating it as closely as possible.
- Goal: Warm up the observation muscles

Patterns with emotional/physical twist

- This is an evolution of the standard pattern game. In the original, students stand in a circle and are given a category. They send a word that would belong in that category to a person across the circle, each student doing the same until everyone has spoken. That series of words becomes a set pattern. The students repeat with two other categories until they have three distinct patterns, which they then perform simultaneously, adding one at a time. This builds listening skills amidst distractions.
- In my evolution, one of the categories is emotions, and students must create a clear physical to accompany that emotion. Once the patterns begin to layer, the students will not be allowed to say the name of the emotion, but must rely on only the physical to communicate.
- Goal: Build listening and observation beyond simply the spoken word to include physicality

Observation and Reaction

Round 1: Observation

- Have the students perform some short two-person scenes, with a simple added mechanic. When you call their name, they must declare what they believe the other person is truly feeling with the words "You are [EMOTION]." After they speak this line, their scene partner must continue the scene, taking that line in as a part of the scene.
- Make sure the students are naming specific emotions that *are* actually emotions. "Upset" is too vague, "tired" doesn't get to the emotional truth of what the person is feeling, etc. Similarly, what their scene partner *wants* is not an emotion (nor is any other narrative-based statement). Get them to see the emotion behind the objective.
- If they aren't sure what is going on with the other person, encourage them to take a risk and name something. If they're wrong, they'll find out fairly immediately from their scene partner's reaction.
- Encourage them not to look at *you* when the mechanic is triggered, but to stay with their scene partner.

Round 2: Observation+Reaction

- Once again, have the students perform two-person scenes with the same mechanic, but this time, their statement is more complex. It should be "You are [EMOTION] and that makes me feel [EMOTION]."
- This forces not only to observe but to notice their own instinctual emotional reaction to what their scene partner is feeling.

- If students are having trouble figuring out what they are feeling, or are saying they don't feel anything, encourage them to take their scene partner's emotional behavior seriously. Whatever is going on with their scene partner has 100% to do with *them*.

Debrief: What is easier for you, naming your scene partner's emotion or your own? How does it change the scene once you've named the emotions? Present the idea of the tennis match: each thing your scene partner says or does should prompt a specific response that could send the scene in any different direction.

Physicalizing Emotional Reaction

- Using two-person scenes as our base, we are no longer speaking the emotion out loud, but physicalizing the emotional reaction.
- Simple version: After every line spoken, and before they can speak the next line, the student must either take a step toward their scene partner or a step away from their scene partner, based on how they feel about what was just said.
- Intermediate version: Not only must they step forward or back, but they must let out a vocal reaction (not containing words) as they do so.
- Advanced version: Because I use Viewpoints as a physical foundation in many of my classes, my students can take this a step further. Instead of using the step forward or back as their reaction, I encourage them to take a Shape or perform an Expressive Gesture in response to whatever they receive from their scene partner. This allows for more specificity than simply the step forward and back.
- Troubleshooting: If you find in the simple version that students' physicality and emotional expression are not lining up, you can alter it so that, rather than one step forward or back, they must get either as close as possible to (respecting physical boundaries) or as far away as possible from their scene partner with every reaction. Although unnatural, this may trigger a more complete marriage of the physical and emotional.

Debrief: What did you find more difficult, naming emotional reaction or physicalizing it? Why? What happens to the scene when it becomes so physically reactive? How can you build those muscles?

Putting It Together

Montage

- Have the students perform a simple montage with a focus on simple emotional reaction.
- If you find they are becoming plot-focused or out of their bodies, side coach them into any of the above exercises inside the montage.

Debrief: How can we bring emotional reaction into our improvisation regardless of form? How might it function in shortform, in longform, in genre and style, etc? What does it give us?