

Street Theater Workshop
Led by Anu Yadav
9:00am-12pm, Saturday
Poverty Initiative Strategic Dialogue #2
November 6-9, 2008

Introduction

Movements begin with the telling of untold stories. Throughout history, art and culture have played a vital role within social movements, spreading inspiration, awareness, and have been a galvanizing and unifying force. There is still much left to be discovered about the significant role of art and culture within movements, and how it has been and can potentially act as a new form of organizing.

In this workshop we are going to do a few simple exercises you can use as icebreakers to get a group jazzed up and happy, and also the basics of how you can create a play. Within each step of this workshop are many more exercises to take you further to build a stronger piece of theater. But for the purpose of this workshop, we will go quickly through each step. At the end of this summary is a short bibliography if you want more interesting exercises to use in your organizing.

My background

I'm an actress and playwright from Washington, DC. My first major play was a one-woman show called `Capers. It was based on the stories of members of Friends and Residents of Arthur Capper/Carrollsborg, or 'Friends and Residents' for short. Friends and Residents was an organizing group of residents from the Arthur Capper/Carrollsborg public housing projects in southeast DC who were protesting the demolition of their neighborhood and forced relocation of the community. This was being funded through HOPE VI, a federally-funded grant program, so this was not only happening throughout DC, but throughout the country.

I was a member of Friends and Residents, and a year after my involvement, I asked people I knew if I could interview them and write a play based on their words. I would perform all the characters. I thought it would be a great way to make use of my skills as a performer and writer to support the organizing. The play could be a way to get the message out, as well as generate a pool of volunteers to help out with the organizing campaign. However, the play itself outlived the campaign.

It has still played an important role in telling the stories of families of this community to thousands of people who would not have otherwise known. The play became a way to spark discuss of Friends and Residents organizers with people from other public housing projects facing the same situation, to share winning tactics in organizing. It brought media attention from the Washington Post newspaper and their online video reporting. It made the Housing Authority have to publicly answer questions about their decisions in

this process. And, I believe, it has played a role in changing—albeit not stopping -- the local version of HOPE VI, which is called the New Communities Initiative.

Whenever possible, I invite one or some of the organizers from the original neighborhood to speak to the audiences wherever I perform. For the women I know, it has been extremely validating to have people at colleges, national conferences, private boarding schools, foundations, etc, to listen to their experiences as organizers sharing their lessons learned.

The first reading at the community center in Arthur Capper back in 2004 was significant in that it was the first time that room had been used as a way to encourage people to say what they think, rather than bribe, coerce, or otherwise repress vocal community leadership. After the performance, I received 2 standing ovations from an audience largely consisting of people I knew, whom I had interviewed, from grandmothers to teens and children. Then, one by one, people spoke for literally 7-10 minutes each on how their human rights had been violated. Residents from other public housing projects were there, and shared their fears of it happening their neighborhood. It was powerful, and I realized how I played a role in this moment. People were moved, laughing, seeing their experiences reflected in a performance done with respect and dignity.

I cannot emphasize enough that nurturing our creativity as individuals helps the movement grow stronger. Theater, done in a compassionate, dedicated and thoughtful way can inspire and attract others to join in or at least better understand a cause. The possibilities are endless and brilliantly await us.

The Games

Name Stories

This is a simple exercise that can reveal history, cultural and familial ties, even something new about someone you have known for a while. Some people told stories they usually don't talk about. I felt closer to people after this short exercise, and noticed how each person took a risk to say something personal about themselves.

Pick one part of your name and tell us a story about it. How is it meaningful to you? What does it say about you?

Human Chain (part 1)

This is a fun exercise for people who won't mind holding hands in a circle. It can be a conversation starter around shared leadership – how does one decide who leads and who follows in a group? Please note: the second half to Human Chain is listed right after a game called “Dragons and Shields.”

1. Stand and form a circle as a group, holding hands.

2. Notice everything you can about the person on your right – from the colors of their clothing, to the hand you are holding, or how they are standing. Now do the same for the person on your left.
3. Now break up the circle and begin walking throughout the room.

Dragons & Shields

1. Walk throughout the room over any space not occupied by another person. *(If the group starts to walk in a pattern -- like a circle-- break it up by telling them to walk in different directions, or zig zag.) Here you can have the group walk in different ways (for example, “walk as if you are in a hurry, as if you are tired, excited, you just found out you won the lottery, etc). This helps energize the group.*
2. While walking, secretly pick one person in the room who will be your “Dragon.” When I say “go,” you will stay as far away from your Dragon as possible while still walking in the room. Go!
3. Freeze! Now drop your Dragon, and just walk normally in the room. Now pick a completely different Dragon.
4. In addition to your Dragon, pick another person who will be your “Shield.” When I say “Go,” you will stay as far away from your Dragon, and keep your Shield between you and your Dragon at all times. Stick to your Shield and stay away from your Dragon. Go!
5. You can repeat 3&4 if it looks like people want to continue. At the end, have everyone stop in their positions, and reveal who was their Dragon and their Shield.

I learned this game from theater workshop led by Professor James Thompson from the University of Manchester. Originally called “Bombs and Shields,” Thompson tells the story of leading this theater exercise in Sri Lanka where there is an ongoing decades-old civil war. He taught it to a group that consisted of people from both sides of the war, the main ethnic groups of the Tamils and Sinhalese. He decided to skip the exercise because it had the word “Bomb” in it and there had recently been a rash of suicide bombings in a couple of the major cities. However someone in the group saw his notes and said, “let’s do this game.” So he changed “bomb” to “dragon” and played the game. Afterwards, in the post-game discussion, one man said that he had chosen someone from the rival ethnic group to be his “Shield.” The acting of moving towards this person as his protector made him physically shudder and shake, and challenged how he thought about this person. He found the exercise useful. It was transformative for everyone in the room.

Human Chain (part 2)

1. Walk throughout the room.
2. Now as a group, huddle as close as possible to each other.
3. When I say go, you will reach for the hands of the people you originally held hands with in the beginning circle. Remember closely, reach with your left hand for the person who was originally on your left. But grab their right hand (the

- hand you started with). Reach your right hand to the person who was on your right. Grab their left hand.
4. Keep holding hands, and untangle back to the original circle – without breaking the chain and without using word or sound.

Ask the group: What was easy? What was difficult about this part of the exercise? Did you notice anyone lead or follow more? How did the group decide who to follow?

Image Theater in Pairs

I learned this exercise from Brazilian theater practitioner Augusto Boal. It is a way for people to communicate without using words, and use human sculpture as a way to generate story ideas. It can also be a way to spark discussion by having people create sculptures around particular themes.

1. Divide the group into pairs of two.
2. Have one pair demonstrate the following exercise. Have the pair shake hands and freeze in that position.
3. Person A of the pair stays frozen and person B steps out of the “scene.”
4. Ask the group what does Person A look like they could be doing.
5. Have Person B re-enter the scene but in a different position than when they started. They don’t have to touch the person, but they have to make some connection to that person. For example, if Person A looks like he is holding a flag, Person B could help hold the invisible flag too.
6. Now the scene has changed. Ask the group to make up a story of what is happening in the frozen scene. Who are they? What are they doing? Where did they just come from?
7. Now, Person B stays frozen, and Person A steps out, and re-enters the scene in a different position. And so on.
8. Have each pair do this and keep switching positions quickly.
9. After allowing some time for the group to do the exercise, have everyone switch partners and continue doing the exercise.
10. Have the group freeze, and pick one pair to stay frozen. Have everyone watch this pair and make up a story for that scene. Have the group decide who says the first line and second line. Then have the pair act out those lines. We’ve created a scene!

Note: After the group does this for 7-10 minutes, people get more comfortable and experimental. Emphasize that people should change movement in the blink of an eye. Doing it as quickly as possible means that people stop thinking about their next move and instead trust their first impulse. Also tell them that the movement doesn’t need to make any sense. If people are still thinking too much, then have everyone do it in sync to the sound of your clapping. That can help quicken everyone’s pace.

Three Snapshots

1. Divide the group into smaller groups of 4-6 people.
2. Ask people to close their eyes and quietly remember a moment in their life when they took a stand for something and it made a difference. Make sure to say, “think of a moment you are willing to share with the group.” It could be their story, or that of someone they know. The moment could be an act of courage on behalf of another person, a group, or the person the story is about. Have everyone remember all the details of that moment: colors, sounds, textures, environment, weather, number of people, where people were positioned, what people said, etc.
3. Have people share their story with their smaller group, then decide which story their group will make into a short play.
4. Once they pick a story, give the rules of the playmaking: It must be in “three snapshots.” This means the story will be depicted in three nonverbal still human sculptures involving everyone in the group as actors. One snapshot each for the beginning, middle and end of the story. Each snapshot will be sculpted by the person whose story it is, and that person must position people quickly without any talking.
5. Allow a time limit of around 7-10 minutes. The purpose of a short time frame is to limit the second-guessing that tends to happen. Once each group is ready, have them present their “snapshot” stories to each other. See if the audience can guess what the story was. Then have the presenting group explain their story.

Three Snapshots can be based on literally any story coming from the group. At the beginning, instead of “a story of courage,” you may want to have the group think of another kind of story, for example, “a time when you were afraid, a time when you got something you wanted, etc.” This story will depend on what you want the group to examine. After a group presents, you can ask how people could tell the details of the story, what clued them in. If groups are interested in going further, they can add word and movement.

Funhouse Mirror

This is a nice warm up or cool down exercise involving observation, and sometimes just plain silliness.

1. Group gets into a circle.
2. Each person turns to look at the person on their right. Observe everything about this person.
3. Everyone should stand with feet shoulder-length apart, arms hanging down, more or less completely still.
4. When you say “go,” everyone will copy exactly what the person to their right is doing, only slightly exaggerating it. They will never create any movement only copy and exaggerate what they see, this is very important.

5. Allow a few minutes of this, then lead the group to do the reverse. Copy exactly what the other person is doing, only slightly less movement until everyone finally reaches stillness.

Closing

Theater exercises offer a creative way to communicate and learn something completely new about people in ways you will not get just by sitting down and talking. Without words you can become friends with someone, and feel connected. Through storytelling, people oftentimes reveal something about their personal lives that they would otherwise not risk sharing. Such exercises – writing, storytelling or dramatizing -- can change a group dynamic or offer insight into the current dynamics of how a group functions. It's useful to have a group discussion after leading a particularly long or interesting exercise. Asking specific questions in the discussion can point the group towards larger themes connected to their organizing, to society and human relations, shared values, oppressions, and an analysis of power.

The most important thing about theater is learning to trust one's own first impulses in expression. In order to do this, the goal of all exercises are ultimately about people feeling comfortable in their bodies, as themselves. All particular details of instructions and games can and should be modified to fit the people in the room, and the mutual goals of the group.

Bibliography

Baime, Clark & Sally Brookes. Geese Theater Handbook: Drama with Offenders and People at Risk. Waterside Press. 2002.

It is useful as far as exercises to teach people who are really new to theater and acting. Also includes discussion questions each exercise can bring up, which is extremely useful because it not only teaches you games, but how they are relevant to issues any group might face regarding trust, community-building, fear, leadership.

Boal, Augusto. Games for Actors and Non-Actors. Routledge. 2002.

A treasure trove of games and interesting stories for how he has taught them in the past.

Spolin, Viola. Improvisation for the Theater: A Handbook of Theater and Directing Techniques. Northwestern University Press. 1999.

An excellent resource that also discusses challenges in teaching games, and how to facilitate a group.

Johnstone, Keith. Impro: Improvisation and the Theater. Theater Arts Book. 1987.

The granddaddy of what is now known as ComedySportz, Johnstone shares stories of how theater can revolutionize education, and also discusses in detail issues of power dynamics in simple exercises. He calls it "status transactions," and this work can be extremely useful for organizing work if done in conjunction with discussions of power both within a group and outside of a group.