

CHAPTER I

CREATIVE EXPERIENCE

Everyone can act. Everyone can improvise. Anyone who wishes to can play in the theater and learn to become “stageworthy.”

We learn through experience and experiencing, and no one teaches anyone anything. This is as true for the infant moving from kicking to crawling to walking as it is for the scientist with equations.

If the environment permits it, anyone can learn whatever he or she chooses to learn; and if the individual permits it, the environment will teach everything it has to teach. “Talent” or “lack of talent” have little to do with it.

We must reconsider what is meant by “talent.” It is highly possible that what is called talented behavior is simply a greater individual capacity for experiencing. From this point of view, it is in the increasing of the individual capacity for experiencing that the untold potentiality of a personality can be evoked.

Experiencing is penetration into the environment, total organic involvement with it. This means involvement on all levels: intellectual, physical, and intuitive. Of the three, the intuitive, most vital to the learning situation, is neglected.

Intuition is often thought to be an endowment or a mystical force enjoyed by the gifted alone. Yet all of us have known moments when the right answer “just came” or we did “exactly the right thing without thinking.” Sometimes at such moments, usually precipitated by crises, danger, or shock, the “average” person has been known to transcend the limitation of the familiar, courageously enter the area of the unknown, and release momentary genius within. When response to experience takes place at

this intuitive level, when a person functions beyond a constricted intellectual plane, intelligence is freed.

The intuitive can only respond in immediacy—right now. It comes bearing its gifts in the moment of spontaneity, the moment when we are freed to relate and act, involving ourselves in the moving, changing world around us.

Through spontaneity we are re-formed into ourselves. It creates an explosion that for the moment frees us from handed-down frames of reference, memory choked with old facts and information and undigested theories and techniques of other people's findings. Spontaneity is the moment of personal freedom when we are faced with a reality and see it, explore it and act accordingly. In this reality the bits and pieces of ourselves function as an organic whole. It is the time of discovery, of experiencing, of creative expression.

Acting can be taught to the "average" as well as the "talented" if the teaching process is oriented towards making the theater techniques so intuitive that they become the students' own. A way is needed to get to intuitive knowledge. It requires an environment in which experiencing can take place, a person free to experience, and an activity that brings about spontaneity.

The full text is a charted course of such activity. The present chapter attempts to help both teacher and student find personal freedom so far as the theater is concerned. Chapter II is intended to show the teacher how to establish an environment in which the intuitive can emerge and experiencing take place: then teacher and student can embark together upon an inspiring, creative experience.

SEVEN ASPECTS OF SPONTANEITY

Games

The game is a natural group form providing the involvement and personal freedom necessary for experiencing. Games develop personal techniques and skills necessary for the game itself, through playing. Skills are devel-

oped at the very moment a person is having all the fun and excitement playing a game has to offer—this is the exact time one is truly open to receive them.

Ingenuity and inventiveness appear to meet any crises the game presents, for it is understood during playing that a player is free to reach the game's objective in any style chosen. As long as we abide by the rules of the game, we may swing, stand on our heads, or fly through the air. In fact, any unusual or extraordinary way of playing is loved and applauded by fellow players.

This makes the form useful not only in formal theater but especially so for actors interested in learning scene improvisation, and it is equally valuable in exposing newcomers to the theater experience, whether adult or child. All the techniques, conventions, etc. that the student-actors have come to find are given to them through playing theater games (acting exercises).

Playing a game is psychologically different in degree but not in kind from dramatic acting. The ability to create a situation imaginatively and to play a role in it is a tremendous experience, a sort of vacation from one's everyday self and the routine of everyday living. We observe that this psychological freedom creates a condition in which *strain* and *conflict* are dissolved and potentialities are released in the spontaneous effort to meet the demands of the situation.¹

Any game worth playing is highly social and has a problem that needs solving within it—an objective point in which each individual must become involved, whether it be to reach a goal or to flip a chip into a glass. There must be group agreement on the rules of the game and group interaction moving towards the objective if the game is to be played.

Players grow agile and alert, ready and eager for any unusual play as they respond to the many random happenings simultaneously. The personal capacity to involve one's self in the problem of the game and the effort put forth to handle the multiple stimuli the game provokes determine the extent of this growth.

1. Neva L. Boyd, *Play, a Unique Discipline*.

Growth will occur without difficulty in students because the very games they play will aid them. The objective upon which the player must constantly focus and towards which every action must be directed provokes spontaneity. In this spontaneity, personal freedom is released, and the total person, physically, intellectually, and intuitively, is awakened. This causes enough excitation for the student to transcend himself or herself—he or she is freed to go out into the environment, to explore, adventure, and face all dangers unafraid.

The energy released to solve the problem, being restricted by the rules of the game and bound by group decision, creates an explosion—or spontaneity—and as is the nature of explosions, everything is torn apart, rearranged, unblocked. The ear alerts the feet, and the eye throws the ball.

Every part of the person functions together as a working unit, one small organic whole within the larger organic whole of the agreed environment which is the game structure. Out of this integrated experience, then, a total self in a total environment, comes a support and thus trust which allows the individual to open up and develop any skills that may be needed for the communication within the game. Furthermore, the acceptance of all the imposed limitations creates the playing, out of which the game appears, or as in the theater, the scene.²

With no outside authority imposing itself upon the players, telling them what to do, when to do it, and how to do it, each player freely chooses self-discipline by accepting the *rules of the game* (“it’s more fun that way”) and enters into the group decisions with enthusiasm and trust. With no one to please or appease, the player can then focus full energy directly on the problem and learn what he or she has come to learn.

Approval/Disapproval

The first step towards playing is feeling personal freedom. Before we can play (experience), we must be free to do so. It is necessary to become part of the world around us and make it real by touching it, seeing it, feeling it,

2. In education, the release of intelligence—learning!

tasting it, and smelling it—direct contact with the environment is what we seek. It must be investigated, questioned, accepted or rejected. The personal freedom to do so leads us to experiencing and thus to self-awareness (self-identity) and self-expression. The hunger for self-identity and self-expression, while basic to all of us, is also necessary for the theater expression.

Very few of us are able to make this direct contact with our selves. Our simplest move out into the environment is interrupted by our need for favorable comment or interpretation by established authority. We either fear that we will not get approval, or we accept outside comment and interpretation unquestionably. In a culture where approval/disapproval has become the predominant regulator of effort and position, and often the substitute for love, our personal freedoms are dissipated.

Abandoned to the whims of others, we must wander daily through the wish to be loved and the fear of rejection before we can be productive. Categorized “good” or “bad” from birth (a “good” baby does not cry too much) we become so enmeshed with the tenuous threads of approval/disapproval that we are creatively paralyzed. We see with others’ eyes and smell with others’ noses.

Having thus to look to others to tell us where we are, who we are, and what is happening results in a serious (almost total) loss of personal experiencing. We lose the ability to be organically involved in a problem, and in a disconnected way, we function with only parts of our total selves. We do not know our own substance, and in the attempt to live through (or avoid living through) the eyes of others, self-identity is obscured, our bodies become misshapen, natural grace is gone, and learning is affected. Both the individual and the art form are distorted and deprived, and insight is lost to us.

Trying to save ourselves from attack, we build a mighty fortress and are timid, or we fight each time we venture forth. Some in striving with approval/disapproval develop egocentricity and exhibitionism; some give up and simply go along. Others, like Elsa in the fairy tale, are forever knocking on windows, jingling their chain of bells, and wailing, “Who am I?” In all cases, contact with the environment is distorted. Self-discovery and other

exploratory traits tend to become atrophied. Trying to be “good” and avoiding “bad” or being “bad” because one can’t be “good” develops into a way of life for those needing approval/disapproval from authority—and the investigation and solving of problems becomes of secondary importance.

Approval/disapproval grows out of authoritarianism that has changed its face over the years from that of the parent to the teacher and ultimately the whole social structure (mate, employer, family, neighbors, etc.).

The language and attitudes of authoritarianism must be constantly scourged if the total personality is to emerge as a working unit. All words which shut doors, have emotional content or implication, attack the student-actor’s personality, or keep a student slavishly dependent on a teacher’s judgment are to be avoided. Since most of us were brought up by the approval/disapproval method, constant self-surveillance is necessary on the part of the teacher-director to eradicate it in himself or herself so that it will not enter the teacher-student relationship.

The expectancy of judgment prevents free relationships within the acting workshops. Moreover, the teacher cannot truly judge good or bad for another, for *there is no absolutely right or wrong way to solve a problem*: a teacher of wide past experience may know a hundred ways to solve a particular problem, and a student may turn up with the hundred and first.³ This is particularly true in the arts.

Judging on the part of the teacher-director limits our own experiencing as well as students’, for in judging, we keep ourselves from a fresh moment of experience and rarely go beyond what we already know. This limits us to the use of rote-teaching, of formulas and other standard concepts which prescribe student behavior.

Authoritarianism is more difficult to recognize in approval than in disapproval—particularly when a student begs for approval, to get a sense of himself or herself. Although a teacher’s approval usually indicates progress has been made, it remains progress in the teacher’s terms, not the student’s. In wishing to avoid approving we must therefore be careful not to detach

3. See “Evaluation,” pp. 273–75.

ourselves in such a way that the student feels lost, feels that nothing is being learned, etc.

True personal freedom and self-expression can flower only in an atmosphere where attitudes permit equality between student and teacher and the dependencies of teacher for student and student for teacher are done away with. The problems within the *subject matter* will teach both of them.

Accepting simultaneously a student’s right to equality in approaching a problem and a lack of experience puts a burden on the teacher. This way of teaching at first seems more difficult, for the teacher must often sit out the discoveries of students without interpreting or forcing conclusions on them. Yet it can be more rewarding for the teacher, because when student-actors have truly learned through playing, the quality of performance will be high indeed!

The problem-solving games and exercises in this handbook will help clear the air of authoritarianism, and as the training continues, it should disappear. With an awakening sense of self, authoritarianism drops away. There is no need for the “status” given by approval/disapproval as all (teacher as well as student) struggle for personal insights—with intuitive awareness comes certainty.

The shift away from the teacher as absolute authority does not always take place immediately. Attitudes are years in building, and all of us are afraid to let go of them. Never losing sight of the fact that *the needs of the theater are the real master*, the teacher will be cued, for the teacher too must accept the *rules of the game*. Then the role of guide will be easily found by the teacher-director, who after all knows the theater technically and artistically, and whose experiences are needed in leading the group.

Group Expression

A healthy group relationship demands a number of individuals working interdependently to complete a given project with full individual participation and personal contribution. If one person dominates, the other

members have little growth or pleasure in the activity; a true group relationship does not exist.

Theater is an artistic group relationship demanding the talents and energy of many people—from the first thought of a play or scene to the last echo of applause. Without this interaction there is no place for the single actor, for without group functioning, who would one play for, what materials would one use, and what effects could one produce? A student must learn that “how to act,” like the game, is inextricably bound up with every other person in the complexity of the art form. Improvisational theater requires very close group relationships because it is from group agreement and group playing that material evolves for scenes and plays.

For students first entering the theater experience, working closely with a group gives a great security on one hand and becomes a threat on the other. Since participation in a theater activity is confused by many with exhibitionism (and therefore with the fear of exposure), individuals fancy themselves “one against many,” who must single-handedly brave a malevolent-eyed people sitting in judgment. The student, then, bent on proving self-worth, constantly watches and judges himself or herself and moves nowhere.

When working with a group, however, playing and experiencing things together, the student-actors integrate and find themselves within the whole activity. The differences as well as the similarities within the group are accepted. A group should never be used to induce conformity but, as in a game, should be a spur to action.

The cue for the teacher-director is basically simple: we must see that each student is participating freely at every moment. The challenge to the teacher or leader is to activate each student in the group while respecting each one's immediate capacity for participation. Though the gifted student will always seem to have more to give, yet if a student is participating to the limit of his or her powers and using abilities to the fullest extent, he or she must be respected, no matter how minute the contribution. The student cannot always do what the teacher hopes, but as progress is made, capacities will enlarge. Work with students where they are, not where you think they should be.

Group participation and agreement remove all the imposed tensions and exhaustions of the competitiveness and open the way for harmony. A highly competitive atmosphere creates artificial tensions, and when competition replaces participation, compulsive action is the result. Sharp competition connotes to even the youngest the idea that he or she has to be better than someone else. When a player feels this, energy is spent on this alone; a player becomes anxious and driven, and fellow players become a threat. Should competition be mistaken for a teaching tool, the whole meaning of playing and games is distorted. Playing allows a person to respond with his or her “total organism within a total environment.” Imposed competition makes this harmony impossible, for it destroys the basic nature of playing by occluding self and by separating player from player.

When competition and comparisons run high within an activity, there is an immediate effect on students which shows in their behavior. They fight for status by tearing other people down or develop defensive attitudes, giving detailed “reasons” for the simplest action, bragging, or blaming others for their own deeds. Those who find it impossible to cope with imposed tension turn to apathy and boredom for release. Almost all show signs of fatigue.

Contest and extension, on the other hand, is an organic part of every group activity and gives both tension and release in such a way as to keep the player intact while playing. It is the growing excitement as each problem is solved and more challenging ones appear. Fellow players are needed and welcomed. It can become a process for greater penetration into the environment.

With mastery of each and every problem we move out into larger vistas, for once a problem is solved, it dissolves like cotton candy. When we master crawling, we stand, and when we stand, we walk. This everlasting appearing and dissolving of phenomena develops a greater and greater sight (perceiving) in us with each new set of circumstances. (See all transformation exercises.)

If we are to keep playing, then, natural extension must exist wherein each individual strives to solve consecutively more complicated problems.

These can be solved then, not at the expense of another person and not with the terrible personal emotional loss that comes with compulsive behavior, but by working harmoniously together with others to enhance the group effort or project. It is only when the scale of values has taken competition as the battle cry that danger ensues: the end-result—success—becomes more important than process.

The use of energy in excess of a problem is very evident today. While it is true that some people working on compulsive energies do make successes, they have for the most part lost sight of the pleasure in the activity and are dissatisfied with their achievement. It stands to reason that if we direct all our efforts towards reaching a goal, we stand in grave danger of losing everything on which we have based our daily activities. For when a goal is superimposed on an activity instead of evolving out of it, we often feel cheated when we reach it.

When the goal appears easily and naturally and comes from growth rather than forcing, the end-result, performance or whatever, will be no different from the process that achieved the result. If we are trained only for success, then to gain it we must necessarily use everyone and everything for this end; we may cheat, lie, crawl, betray, or give up all social life to achieve success. How much more certain would knowledge be if it came from and out of the excitement of learning itself? How many human values will be lost and how much will our art forms be deprived if we seek only success?

Therefore, in diverting competitiveness to group endeavor, remembering that process comes before end-result, we free the student-actors to trust the scheme and help them solve the problems of the activity. Both the gifted student who would have success even under high tensions and the student who has little chance to succeed under pressure show a great creative release and the artistic standards within the workshop rise higher when free, healthy energy moves unfettered into the theater activity. Since the acting problems are organic, all are deepened and enriched by each successive experience.

Audience

The role of the audience must become a concrete part of theater training. For the most part, it is sadly ignored. Time and thought are given to the place of the actor, set designer, director, technician, house manager, etc., but the large group without whom their efforts would be for nothing is rarely given the least consideration. The audience is regarded either as a cluster of Peeping Toms to be tolerated by actors and directors or as a many-headed monster sitting in judgment.

The phrase "forget the audience" is a mechanism used by many directors as a means of helping the student-actor to relax on stage. But this attitude probably created the fourth wall. The actor must no more forget the audience than lines, props, or fellow actors!

The audience is the most revered member of the theater. Without an audience there is no theater. Every technique learned by the actor, every curtain and flat on the stage, every careful analysis by the director, every coordinated scene, is for the enjoyment of the audience. They are our guests, fellow players, and the last spoke in the wheel which can then begin to roll. They make the performance meaningful.

When there is understanding of the role of the audience, complete release and freedom come to the player. Exhibitionism withers away when the student-actor begins to see members of the audience not as judges or censors or even as delighted friends but as a group with whom an experience is being shared. When the audience is understood to be an organic part of the theater experience, the student-actor is immediately given a host's sense of responsibility toward them which has in it no nervous tension. The fourth wall disappears, and the lonely looker-in becomes part of the game, part of the experience, and is welcome! This relationship cannot be instilled at dress rehearsal or in a last minute lecture but must, like all other workshop problems, be handled from the very first acting workshop.

If there is agreement that all those involved in the theater should have personal freedom to experience, this must include the audience—each member of the audience must have a personal experience, not artificial

stimulation, while viewing a play. If they are to be part of this group agreement, they cannot be thought of as a single mass to be pulled hither and yon by the nose, nor should they have to live someone else's life story (even for one hour) nor identify with the actors and play out tired, handed-down emotions through them. They are separate individuals watching the skills of players (and playwrights), and it is for each and every one of them that the players (and playwrights) must use these skills to create the magical world of a theater reality. This should be a world where every human predicament, riddle, or vision can be explored, a world of magic where rabbits can be pulled out of a hat when needed and even the devil can be conjured up and talked to.

The problems of present-day theater are only now being formulated into questions. When our theater training can enable the future playwrights, directors, and actors to think through the role of the audience as individuals and as part of the process called theater, each one with a right to a thoughtful and personal experience, is it not possible that a whole new form of theater presentation will emerge? Already fine professional improvising theaters have evolved directly from this way of working, delighting audiences night after night with fresh theatrical experiences.

Theater Techniques

Theater techniques are far from sacred. Styles in theater change radically with the passing of years, for *the techniques of the theater are the techniques of communicating*. The actuality of the communication is far more important than the method used. Methods alter to meet the needs of time and place.

When a theater technique or stage convention is regarded as a ritual and the reason for its inclusion in the list of actors' skills is lost, it is useless. An artificial barrier is set up when techniques are separated from direct experiencing. No one separates batting a ball from the game itself.

Techniques are not mechanical devices—a neat little bag of tricks, each neatly labeled, to be pulled out by the actor when necessary. When the form of an art becomes static, these isolated “techniques” presumed to

make the form are taught and adhered to strictly. Growth of both individual and form suffer thereby, for unless the student is unusually intuitive, such rigidity in teaching, because it neglects inner development, is invariably reflected in performance.

When the actor knows “in my bones” there are many ways to do and say one thing, techniques will come (as they must) from the total self. For it is by direct, dynamic awareness of an acting experience that experiencing and techniques are spontaneously wedded, freeing the student for the flowing, endless pattern of stage behavior. Theater games do this.

Carrying the Learning Process into Daily Life

The artist must always know where he or she is, perceive and be open to receive the phenomenal world in order to create reality on stage. Since theater training does not have practice hours in the home (it is strongly recommended that no scripts be taken home to memorize, even when rehearsing a formal play), what we seek must be brought to the student-actor within the workshop.⁴ This must be done in such a way that it is absorbed, and carried out again (inside the self) to daily living.

Because of the nature of the acting problems, it is imperative to sharpen one's whole sensory equipment, shake loose and free one's self of all preconceptions, interpretations, and assumptions (if one is to solve the problem) so as to be able to make direct and fresh contact with the created environment and the objects and the people within it. When this is learned inside the theater world, it simultaneously produces recognition, direct and fresh contact with the outside world as well. This, then, broadens the student-actors' ability to involve themselves with their phenomenal world and more personally to experience it. Thus *experiencing* is the only actual homework and, once begun, like ripples on water is endless and penetrating in its variations.

When students see people and the way they behave when together, see the color of the sky, hear the sounds in the air, feel the ground beneath

⁴ See pp. 316–18.

them and the wind on their faces, they get a wider view of their personal world and development in the theater is quickened. The world provides the material for the theater, and artistic growth develops hand-in-hand with one's recognition of it and one's self within it.

Physicalization

The term "physicalization" as used in this book describes the means by which material is presented to the student on a physical, non-verbal level as opposed to an intellectual or psychological approach. "Physicalization" provides the student with a personal concrete experience (which can be grasped) on which further development depends; and it gives the teacher and student a working vocabulary necessary to an objective relationship.

Our first concern with students is to encourage freedom of physical expression, because the physical and sensory relationship with the art form opens the door for insight. Why this is so is hard to say, but be certain that it is so. It keeps the actor in an evolving world of direct perception—an open self in relation to the surrounding world.

Reality as far as we know can only be physical, in that it is received and communicated through the sensory equipment. Through physical relationships all life springs, whether it be a spark of fire from a flint, the roar of the surf hitting the beach, or a child born of man and woman. The physical is the known, and through it we may find our way to the unknown, the intuitive, and perhaps beyond to the human spirit itself.

In any art form we seek the experience of going beyond what we already know. Many of us hear the stirring of the new, and it is the artist who must midwife the new reality that we (the audience) eagerly await. It is sight into this reality that inspires and regenerates us. This is the role of the artist, to give sight. What is believed cannot be our concern, for these matters are of intimate nature, private to the actor and not for public viewing. Nor need we be concerned with an actor's feelings. We are interested only in direct physical communication. Feelings, personal to each of us, are of no use in theater. When energy is absorbed in the physical object, there is no time for "feeling" any more than a quarterback running down the field can be

concerned with his clothes or whether he is universally admired. If this seems harsh, be assured that insisting upon this objective (physical) relationship with the art form brings clearer sight and greater vitality to the student-actors. For the energy bound up in fear of exposure is freed (no longer secretive) as the student intuitively realizes no one is peeping at his or her private life or cares where he or she buried the body.

A player can dissect, analyze, intellectualize, or develop a valuable case history for a part, but if one is unable to assimilate it and communicate it physically, it is useless within the theater form. It neither frees the feet nor brings the fire of inspiration to the eyes of those in the audience. The theater is not a clinic, nor should it be a place to gather statistics. The artist must draw upon and express a world that is physical but that transcends objects—more than accurate observation and information, more than the physical object itself, more than the eye can see. We must all find the tools for this expression. "Physicalization" is such a tool.

When a player learns he or she can communicate directly to the audience only through the physical language of the stage, it alerts the whole organism.⁵ Players lend themselves to the scheme and let this physical expression carry them wherever it will. In improvisational theater, for instance, where few or no props, costumes or set pieces are used, players learn that a stage reality must have space, texture, depth and substance—in short, physical reality. It is creating this reality out of nothing, so to speak, that makes it possible for the actor to take a first step into the beyond. For the formal theater where sets and props are used, dungeon walls are but painted canvas and treasure chests empty boxes. Here, too, the player can create the theater reality only by making it physical. Whether with prop, costume, or strong emotion the actor can only *show* us.

5. "Direct communication" as used in this text refers to a moment of mutual perceiving.