

THE ELEMENTS OF DRAMA

A toolbox for diagnosing problems with performance

The elements of drama provide a useful checklist for students and teachers working on student performance. As the elements are the building blocks of a performance, teachers will find it invaluable to focus on each of them when diagnosing problems with a performance. When students become skilled and confident with the use of the elements of drama, the facilitator has a ready reference point to work from. As students continue working with the elements, they will begin to refer to them in their reflection and the development of their own performance work.

In a successful performance the **focus** will be clear, **tension** will be thoughtfully manipulated and managed. This will contribute to the successful creation of an appropriate atmosphere or **mood**. Actors, props and sets will be organised in the space in a way that is aesthetically appropriate and creates meaning. **Roles** will be sustained in a convincing and appropriate way. Devices like **contrast** and **symbol** are also central to the development of a performance.

The following exercises may assist students to identify the strengths and weaknesses of their piece by using and understanding the elements of drama in an active way. By using the elements, students can develop the skills needed in a successful performance.

FOCUS

“The frame that directs attention to what is most significant and intensifies the dramatic meaning”.

A strong performance piece will have a clear intent which influences the performers' motivation and channels the attention of the audience. In other words the piece has a clear focus which determines the focus of the character and actor and directs the focus of the audience.

There are 4 closely related areas of focus:

1. the focus of the scene
2. the focus of the audience
3. the focus of the character
4. the focus of the actor.

To simply demonstrate the concept of focus and tension, the class observes three mini-performances, then discusses and compares them.

- (a) Two people walking around the acting space.
- (b) Two people searching in the acting space for a pen.
- (c) Two people searching for a bomb in the acting space, time limit 20 seconds, defuse by count of 4.

The second performance has a focus; the third has heightened tension.

Activities to develop the focus of the actor/student

- (a) The whole group move in the working space.

An object thrown onto the floor alternatively repels then attracts them, providing a whole-group focus.

- (b) The whole group point to a corner above their heads and move towards it purposefully.

Repeat, focusing attention without finger point.

Walk away from the corner with the focus remaining behind them.

(c) “Nectar of the gods” or “dungeons”.

This creeping up game may be played as a tribe retrieving the nectar of life or prisoners escaping the dungeon. One person stands at one end of the room with the “key” or the “nectar” on the floor at feet. When he or she turns his or her back the rest of the group creep up to get the “key” or “nectar”. Anyone seen moving must return to the start. The group use tactics to pass the object back to the start which sets them free or empowers the tribe. Variations of this sort of game requiring a freeze help to develop focus.

(d) Group counting 1-21.

Anyone may call out a number at any time in an attempt to reach 21 without an overlap of voices.

(e) Group clap.

The aim is to clap as a group simultaneously without a signal. Anyone may initiate the move.

(f) “Edelweiss clap.”

Group stand in a circle with right hand facing up at right side and left hand facing down at left side. A clap is passed around the circle from hand to hand.

(g) “Ray gun”.

An initial ray gunner is nominated. When the person touches another, he/she is hit by the ray gun. The ray gunner points to a person and moves to touch. The victim must call someone else’s name before being touched to save his/her life. The named person becomes the new ray gunner.

TENSION

“The force that engages the performers and audience in the dramatic action”.

Every performance contains the element of tension. In the first activity on focus, where actors wandered in the space, the tension was very low. The second performance, searching for a pen, raised the tension slightly and the third, searching for a bomb, heightened the tension.

To demonstrate and define tension:

(a) String tension

Two people play a scene. A string is stretched across the front of the space. When it is tight they play the scene with high tension; when it is loose they play with low tension.

e.g. a doctor presents results of test
student in principal’s office
opening a birthday present
grocery shopping with kids.

(b) Jewel thief and security guard (introduces concept of dramatic tension)

Group form protective circle around two blindfolded performers.

One is a thief searching for jewels; the other is the security guard attempting to capture him.

SPACE

“The personal and general space used by the actors. It focuses on the meaning of the size and shape of distances between actor and actor, actor and objects (props and sets) and actor and audience.”

To demonstrate and define the element:

(a) Build some statues of frozen moments e.g. “Don’t speak to your mother like that!”

Discuss: “What is the focus of this scene?”, “How do we know?”

Remove facial expression and gestures.

(b) Discuss: “How does the space between the people and the objects on the stage convey meaning?”

Demonstrate the power of the space to carry meaning by moving people around without altering their gestures or expression.

In small groups build a statue which indicates status and relationships through the use of “space”, e.g. a family, a court, a gang, an argument, a peace treaty.

MOOD

“The atmosphere created. Mood concentrates the dramatic action and moves the audience in emotionally appropriate directions.”

To demonstrate and define mood:

- (a) Form small groups. Listen to an allocated piece of music. Select some scarves from the props box which reflect the mood, atmosphere or feelings created by the music.
- (b) Develop 3 freeze frame statues which capture this mood. Find a way to move from one freeze frame to the next, using the scarves to emphasise the mood. Punctuate the movement by occasionally calling out a word which reflects the mood that you are working on.

CONTRAST

“The use of difference to create dramatic meaning.”

Contrast is an effective means to emphasise, heighten or intensify. Contrasting colours stand out on the stage. Contrasting sizes, shapes and sounds draw attention.

To demonstrate and define contrast:

- (a) From the previous exercise select two pieces of music which you feel offer a useful contrast, to create either a serious or humorous effect. Mime a scene which illustrates this contrast.
- (b) Explore the effect of improvising with characters who have contrasting characteristics e.g. fat/thin, loud/soft, rough/gentle, tall/short, wise/silly.

The contrast exaggerates the feature, throwing emphasis on it.

SYMBOL

“The use of objects, gestures or persons to represent meaning beyond the literal.”

Every culture has developed an elaborate series of signals where objects are endowed with meaning. It is possible to signal complex ideas through commonly recognised symbols.

To demonstrate and define symbols:

Work in pairs. Select an object from a collection of symbols; develop a brief scene which relies on the symbolic strength of the object to convey meaning, e.g. rose, heart, flag, treasure chest, suitcase, lipstick on collar, walking stick, pipe, dove, teddy bear, cross, stethoscope, heart, skull, peace sign, ring, broken doll, sunset, infinity. Gestures: handshake, salute, turned back.

ROLE

Taking on a role requires performers to accept the physicality, attitudes and beliefs of the characters they are playing. Laban movement exercises provide an excellent springboard for developing the physicality of character. A range of exercises to develop skill in other aspects of role may be found in *Dramawise* by Haseman and O’Toole.

As students become familiar with each of these elements and devices, they are better able to identify for themselves the areas of their work which need attention. It is often helpful to step away from the performance briefly and revisit key elements in order to see the work afresh.

Teachers can use the elements as a checklist as they observe and provide students with meaningful feedback on their performance work.

Lindy Croft-Piggin
District Creative Arts Consultant
Albury/Deniliquin