

# 1 HOW TO BEGIN

## what this chapter covers...

Amateur drama can flourish in a wide variety of settings. In this chapter we look at how to set your group on its first steps towards becoming a long-term, thriving drama company, whatever your setting and whoever your prospective members may be.

We look briefly at the where and when of group meetings and consider the importance of the group's name.

## INTRODUCTION

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Being a member of an amateur drama group can be fun and very rewarding, but there may not be one in your area and setting up a group from scratch, finding out just how to begin, can be a daunting prospect. This book aims to pass on basic, practical advice, born of experience, to anyone who, with like-minded people in their community, wishes to form such a group. It may be in an urban area or a village; it may be for children or for youth, for adults who are still working or for those who are retired. For those using amateur drama within an organisation – school or prison for example – some of the information may not be needed, although Sections 2 and 3, concerning performance organisation and drama technique, are applicable to drama in any setting. Whenever amateur drama is practised, both participants and audience benefit from the social interaction and the enjoyment which the Arts can give. Members of the group will learn new skills, make new friends and gain in a confidence which should carry through into other aspects of their lives. But how do you begin?

## A STARTING POINT

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The process generally begins in a small way by the coming together of a few people, wherever they live, who are interested in forming an

## 2 SETTING A FOUNDATION

### what this chapter covers...

Even very early in the process of setting up a drama group, it is worth considering organisational aspects such as *committees*, a working *constitution* and issues of *funding*. If you are aware of these from the outset – and deal with them in a timely fashion – you will be freer to run and enjoy the group in the long term.

### SETTING A FOUNDATION FOR THE FUTURE

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The initial meetings will have seen members of the steering group do a great deal of work toward organising its new drama company. Even if originally they only came together with the specific idea of performing a certain play, there must come a time, whatever the group's original concept, when they must set the group on a firm and permanent foundation.

This requires the setting up of a business committee and the formulation of a governing document, which will become the group's Constitution. There are those who advise organisers to have a formal Constitution from the beginning, but too many hard and fast rules in the earliest stages have been known to stifle enthusiasm. Better, perhaps, to wait until several meetings have been enjoyed, founding members have come to know each other, have decided on their achievable objects and know that they wish to continue as a group. Then, committee members could be proposed and voted in by the membership and, after discussion, they will formulate the constitution to be agreed and voted upon by all members at a general meeting. So, the company will have set itself on a firm foundation with members knowing that they belong to a well-organised group, which can move forward into the future with confidence.

## 3 DRAMA ACTIVITIES

### what this chapter covers...

With the committee in place, the constitution agreed and some funds behind you, it is time to start the fun of running a real, functioning group.

In this chapter we look at the role of the *group leader* and suggest a possible *format for the regular group meetings*. Other activities which will be of interest and value to the group are also considered.

## DRAMA GROUP MEETINGS

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### THE ROLE OF THE LEADER

To begin with, there will be one member of the steering group, preferably someone with experience in drama, who will be willing to take over the role of leader once the group has been formed, although as time goes on, others may be willing to organise some of the group evenings or other events, such as fund raising, which may be planned at a later date. This help should be welcomed, for if meetings are held weekly and only one person is 'in charge' the load can become heavy, and anyway, a different leader will bring new ideas and further the experience of the group.

For the new leader, or anyone unused to organising an evening of activities for a social drama group, the following tips may prove useful.

- **Structure the evening.** In other words, plan what you intend to do, but be prepared to be flexible, and always have more ideas or material than you think you need.
- **Maintain control** in a friendly, not dictatorial manner. To avoid possible argument or dissent always ensure that each member is clear as to what he is to do.
- **Be sensitive** to the mood of the group and don't plough on with something if, after a while, it is clear that members are not receptive to it.

## 4 RULES & REGULATIONS

### what this chapter covers...

In this chapter we look briefly at the *legal* considerations necessary before any play can be performed. These may influence the *choice of play*, so should be part of the play selection process.

### COPYRIGHT

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It is worth noting here the legal situation regarding the public performance of any play, even a rehearsed reading. You do need a licence to perform a play, even if you still have the script in your hand. Reading for private pleasure or for the education of any group does not require permission from the author's agent nor a licence, but you would need to acquire a licence if an audience, paying or not, is to be present.

The author of a play, or of any other published written work, holds the copyright to that work. Before anyone may perform it in public, they must have permission to do so and pay the required licence fee. Most authors have their agents deal with this, and so, before deciding on any production, and definitely before rehearsals begin, the group should obtain permission from the agent whose name is generally printed in the front of the play copy.

You should also note that adapting an original work or omitting text in a play amounts to a breach of copyright. Most agents issue licences on the understanding that 'the integrity of the author's work will be preserved'. However, if you do wish to 'cut' some of a play you may well find, on enquiring, that an author or his agent may be sympathetic to the request – it all depends on the writer.

Excerpts from written work also hold the same requirement for public performance, although if an excerpt is being used only for educational

## 5 THINKING AHEAD

### what this chapter covers...

Before beginning to put a production together, it is necessary to know exactly what your performance *venue* will be. In this chapter we consider the most common types of venue before going on to look at the various *business aspects* of planning a production. You will need to pay particular attention to *marketing* if your hard work is to be seen by as wide an audience as possible!

### STAGING A PRODUCTION

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As meetings continue and time moves on, you, as a group will doubtless begin to consider when you can begin to work on a production for public performance. You will decide what kind of play you wish to do and begin to look for a script which would be suitable for the company, but you'll also need to know where the production will take place. It's a fact that a performance may be staged anywhere where there is one area for the actors and another for the audience who come to see them, and you may decide that, since you already know your hall, you would like to perform a play there – but there is no stage. That doesn't matter, you could still go ahead, and create your first production in what is generally known as a Studio space.

#### STUDIO SPACE

Studio performances can be staged in any room as long as it is large enough to provide an acting area and seating for your audience. Audience numbers will be regulated by the fire regulations relating to the room, and you can arrange the acting area wherever it would be most appropriate in the light of where your audience would sit. Set design should be kept to a minimum, you may have to have to use screens to simulate entrances, and you couldn't have too large a cast. But since your audience is very close to you, on the same level, in fact, a Studio space creates an intimacy and a relationship between cast and

## 6 PLANNING A PRODUCTION

### what this chapter covers...

In this chapter we will consider the different *types of production* available to a drama group. These include plays, musicals, pageants and revues.

We will then look at the factors involved in deciding which type of production is most suitable when your *budget, venue, membership* and various other skills involved in staging a show are taken into account.

### CHOICE OF PRODUCTION

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Having shown that any drama production is very much a team effort, and that every member can make a valuable contribution to your success, it's time to decide what exactly your public is going to see. If you've had play reading evenings you may already know what you want to do, but for a new group about to launch itself into the public eye for the first time, here are some things to consider.

As a general rule, it is unwise for a new group to begin with a great musical extravaganza or a long three-act play, and not many would wish to do so, if for no other reason than both would involve a great deal of rehearsal. In fact you would probably prefer to rehearse one act plays, so that you have the satisfaction of seeing the finished product after only a few months work, without having to perfect, not only acting, but the equally specialist arts of music and dance. But whatever you plan to stage as your public performance, whether it's your first or fiftieth, do remember that the work involved must be shared among members of the group. Neither the leader nor the director can do it all on his own. So the secretary or treasurer could handle booking space and sending for scripts, for example, while other work – set, costume and properties – is divided between those who will not be acting this time. Also remember that even when you have chosen your play:

- You must obtain permission for its performance from the author or his agent before any rehearsals begin and you must budget for the licence fee which you will have to pay (see p27).

## 7 THEATRE-SPEAK

### what this chapter covers...

Theatre uses words and phrases which can puzzle anyone new to the stage, so it is as well to know the 'technical' terms before you come across them in a script or hear them from someone used to drama. In this chapter we look at some of those most commonly encountered.

### TECHNICAL TERMS

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**Stage Left, Stage Right.** This always means left and right from the actor's point of view, so, for example, an actor obeying script instructions to move left will, from the audience point of view, be moving to the right across the stage. Upstage and downstage is fairly obvious – upstage being, to the actor, up and away from the audience, and downstage being down towards the audience.

**Apron.** The forestage area of a stage in front of the curtains and the proscenium arch.

**Wings.** This area, hidden from audience view by flats or curtains, lies immediately to the left and right of the stage. Here properties will be laid ready for use and here actors wait and shiver until they must appear on stage. It may or may not be lit by a low-powered blue light to avoid accidents. It's worth remembering that any sound made in this area will almost certainly be heard in the hall.

**The Prompt corner.** Generally in the wings, downstage left, where a small space may be set aside for the prompter, who, often with torch in hand, will pore over the script, while praying that the actors don't forget their words. In a professional theatre, this is generally situated in front of the Desk. Here, the Deputy Stage Manager sits with script and headphones which link to the technical gallery. There technicians await

## 8 SETTING THE SCENE

### what this chapter covers...

There's a lot more to a great production than just good acting! In this chapter we will look at the army of *back-stage* workers who create the world in which the actors perform. This vital group, from the *director* to the *production manager*, from the *sound designer* to the *property master* has an essential – if often seemingly invisible – hand in every successful show.

### PRODUCTION PROFILES

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#### WHO'S IN CHARGE?

It will be the **Producer** and/or the **Director** who will have the casting vote when the decision was made to choose a specific play, and in many cases in amateur drama that is one and the same person. In the professional world, the Producer (with his production manager) is generally responsible for the finance and over-all organisation of a production, for controlling spaces, stage, set and budgeting, and for assembling the crew, technical and backstage workers. The Director works to bring the production to life through his actors and the effects he's asked of the technicians. Since we are here dealing with amateur drama, the leader of the project could be referred to either as producer or director, for although he will principally be 'directing the traffic' on stage, he'll also be working with others, budgeting, planning and designing the production, as well as organising and overseeing those in the team responsible for everything else, from finding furniture or properties to dressing the actors or painting and dressing the set.

The producer of amateur theatre must be prepared to take on responsibility for the production and for everyone who'll work on it, listening and responding to them, encouraging and helping them to succeed. He it is who will ultimately be responsible for the overall artistic achievement of the work which the audience will see. He must

# 9 STAGE MANAGEMENT

## what this chapter covers...

You've chosen the play, got the actors and back stage crew, and rehearsals are about to start. What you need now is someone who can co-ordinate the whole process. For most shows, this will be the *stage manager*, ably assisted by a *deputy* and *assistants*. In this chapter we will look in detail at these essential roles.

## THE STAGE MANAGEMENT TEAM

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### THE STAGE MANAGER (SM)

The Stage Manager is the link between the director and the production manager in charge of the physical side of the work needed to stage a performance – although in fact, if it's a small scale production, he may well take on that role as well, and organise a team to help do the work involved. He will also work closely with the director throughout rehearsals and it is his job to see that the public performances run smoothly.

To this end he should, ideally, be a leader of a calm disposition, able to plan ahead, to organise and make decisions quickly, and able to communicate effectively with others. As will be seen, there's much for him to do, and so he should arrange that his assistants (ASMs) help cover the work, so that in many cases he'll take on an over-seeing role, rather than trying to do everything himself. So, if you are Stage Manager, the ability to *organise and delegate* is not only useful, but essential!

### GENERAL RESPONSIBILITIES

- You will be responsible for all aspects of the stage area, both in rehearsal and performance, and you must ensure that your assistants know exactly what's expected of them, notifying them of any changes which the director may make, and through regular production meetings, checking that they're happy with what they're doing. Like the props manager, you should be good at making lists!

# 10 FROM PAGE TO STAGE

## what this chapter covers...

It is the aim of every director to transform the dry stark words printed on the pages of the script into an engaging and memorable performance. There is a lot more to this than just telling the actors where to move.

A good director will know the play intimately, will cast it well, have ideas for set, lighting and sound, and be able to keep morale and enthusiasm up from the first meeting to the arrival of the audience. *And* tell the actors where to move!

In this chapter we look in detail at this most complex of theatre jobs.

## THE ROLE OF THE DIRECTOR

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Many directors start their lives in amateur drama as actors, and this can be a great help when you come to take on the responsibility of producing a play yourself. Having been part of the process before, you will know what's involved, will find it easier to understand the problems that your actors may face and you should be able to help them perfect their skills. However, it is inadvisable to take part in the play you are directing. Your work will be doubled, and even if yours is only a small role, you won't be able to focus 100% on the other actors because you will have to think about what your character should be doing. It's obvious, too, that if you are actually on stage, you can't get a true and objective overview of what's happening all the time. It's especially unwise to cast yourself, however tempting it may be, if you are working with a relatively inexperienced group, for they are going to need help if their work is to reach a high standard. And in amateur drama you will not only be working with the actors. During rehearsals you will be expected to continue monitoring everything that happens as part of your production.

For some months, from the moment the decision to stage the play has been made and the venue booked, to the end of First Night when the curtain falls – and perhaps, if things go wrong, to the end of the production – you as the Director will live with that play as an integral part of your life. As part of this commitment, you will:

# 11 NOTES FOR THE ACTOR

## what this chapter covers...

In this chapter we will look at some of the skills needed to produce a good on-stage performance. We start by considering character and how to find clues to what your character is *really* like from the script. We will move on to tips for learning lines before addressing some common questions beginners ask.

## NOTES FOR THE ACTOR ...

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Once cast in a play you, as an actor, can be sure that you'll enjoy yourself and probably learn a great deal. But you have special responsibilities and there are several things you should bear in mind. Remember that

- You have taken on a commitment and you owe it both to yourself, the director and to the other actors to attend rehearsals when required to do so and to arrive on time. Believe it or not, you will be missed if you're not there when you should be and your absence will affect everyone else's work, not just your own. You must be prepared to work as a member of the team. 'Prima donnas' are neither popular nor successful.
- Rehearsals are only the tip of the iceberg when it comes to the script. The actor who leaves his book unopened between rehearsals will never succeed. You should study the script and practise at home, perfecting the moves and learning the lines. You should think about the character you're playing until you know so much about him that you can become him.
- Once the blocking's been done, you should work at learning the lines and be prepared to drop the script when required to do so. Until now, your script has been something of a crutch, but now you must walk without it. At first you're bound to wobble, but as your steps (lines) become stronger with each rehearsal, so the wobble becomes less, until at last you're standing confident on your own two feet. For tips on how to learn lines, see p132, but whichever

# 12 PRACTICAL SKILLS

## **what this chapter covers...**

This chapter forms an introduction to a series of chapters dealing with the practical side of drama group meetings. The games and exercises which follow form the backbone of such meetings, and are designed to be both fun and invaluable for developing the skills needed for performance.

## **ACQUIRING SKILLS – AN INTRODUCTION**

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In this section we look at activities which can be used by members of all ages in any amateur drama group, activities which are not only fun to do, but which will also help those involved to grow in confidence as well as in drama skills. As they share these activities, members will get to know each other better and learn to trust each other, and at the same time build a confidence, which will enable them to try something new and succeed in it. In particular, these exercises and improvisations should help an amateur actor learn techniques which will help improve his performance on stage. A good actor needs to know how to use concentration, imagination and observation if he is to succeed. He must be able to use both physical and vocal expression to good effect, to enjoy working as a member of a team, sharing ideas, summoning the confidence and energy to bring a written character to life. The activities in this section will foster these skills, but above all, all members of a social drama group should find that if they take part, even if just for enjoyment, they will still benefit in some way.

The following chapters should also help a drama leader to fashion an entertaining evening for members of his group. The ideas can be mixed and matched so as to provide fun, as well as perhaps targeting a particular area of expertise or skill needed in a current or forthcoming production, although only the organiser may be aware of this objective. It is expected that members will be asked to 'show' what they've done, especially in partner or group work (and especially if the leader has seen that it's good), but no member should be forced to do so if he feels his

# 14 CONCENTRATE!

## what this chapter covers...

In this chapter we consider the value of good concentration, and begin to develop techniques to enable performers to do it in the most challenging of situations – on stage and under the glare of an audience...

## THE NEED FOR CONCENTRATION

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Concentration is an individual skill, one which everyone uses to some degree every day (and especially when acting) but it is a skill which becomes easier with practice. Most of the exercises and activities in this section incorporate some concentration, but the following are specifically designed with this in mind. So, although they may be listed as partner or group work, everyone in fact will be practising the art. Although listed under a specific heading, concentration games could also be used as warm-ups or ice-breakers or before relaxation exercises. Relaxation is generally more effective if it follows tension – and intense concentration does involve a certain amount of both mental and physical tension, even if we may not recognise it at the time. On the other hand, it could be said that people concentrate better if they are relaxed. Whatever your view, there are benefits in either case.

## PARTNERS

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In the first three exercises the roles should be reversed after a few minutes.

### MIRROR IMAGE

This is one of the more well-known exercises. **A** and **B** stand facing each other. **A** then slowly makes movements which **B** must mirror, whether they are physical and/or facial. They may become more

# 15 RELAX...

## what this chapter covers...

In the last chapter we looked at the importance of concentration. Closely allied to this is the ability to relax – a relaxed mind concentrates better than a tense one. Since mind and body work together, we will look now at effective ways to relax the body without the need for any complicated or specialised techniques.

## THE NEED FOR RELAXATION

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The ability to relax is of paramount importance to an actor because body tension affects both movement and voice in a negative way. No actor can work freely and with conviction if his body or mind is tense, for muscles tighten when they should relax and the mind no longer functions efficiently.

Relaxation is an individual, personal skill but it should be practised regularly so that the relaxed state can be called up easily when it is needed – as in the moments just before performance. Relaxation exercises are most effective if practised while lying on the floor, for then the whole body can relax easily, and ten or fifteen minutes should be allowed if the exercise is to be really effective. But unless there's plenty of time, and mats have been brought along with this exercise specifically in mind, the first exercise here may not always be possible during an ordinary group meeting in a hall. With that in mind, other 'loosening up' exercises which can be done while standing or sitting, are also included. However, be careful to pace what you do, especially at first. *Whichever exercise you under-take, never move too quickly and never force your body. If you feel a twinge or an ache, then stop and don't try so hard next time.* Members with a specific medical problem could do the exercise sitting in a chair.

# 16 PERFORMANCE SKILLS 1

## what this chapter covers...

In this chapter we consider in some detail the first of two essential aspects of performance skill: the *voice*. Games to help with the understanding and control of breathing, articulation and projection are covered here.

## VOCAL PERFORMANCE SKILLS

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As we have seen you will never perform well on stage if you are tense, and the relaxed state is just as important for voice production as it is for body movement. Your voice will not have the energy needed to project itself or the feelings it must express unless you are relaxed. So, vocal skills begin with a relaxed state, which is important for expression, projection and clarity, and continue with correct breathing from the diaphragm.

## BREATH CONTROL

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All of us breathe and speak without even thinking about it, but for the actor correct breathing is paramount to successful voice production. Without this skill you'll be unable to speak clearly or express emotions effectively. You'll run out of breath before you reach the end of a speech, or your voice will drop at the end of a sentence. Here are a few basic exercises to help you breathe correctly. Repeat them two or three times. Find a space and stand relaxed and comfortable with your feet slightly apart.

- 1 Place your hands at the base of your ribs and as you breathe IN feel the muscles draw the ribs upwards, as your diaphragm descends and your stomach muscles relax. As you breathe OUT the stomach muscles contract, the diaphragm rises and the ribs are drawn down and inwards.

# 17 PERFORMANCE SKILLS 2

## what this chapter covers...

The second half of our discussion of performance skills deals with physical performance, and in this chapter we will consider how to create characters through posture, movement and gesture and how body language can drastically affect the meaning of the words in the script.

## PHYSICAL PERFORMANCE SKILLS

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There are many aspects to performing, and although, having read the script, you may know what the play is about, the script itself is not the whole story. The playwright has created the plot, the characters and the dialogue, but it is the actor, with his director, who brings it all to life. So how do you do that?

## BODY LANGUAGE

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Speech is the most obvious means of communication, but although we may not realise it, body language is equally important. Body language means movements made by the body, generally involuntary, which give obvious or subliminal signals, clues to our intention/motivation, and our reaction to any emotion, person or situation. Millions of years ago, before language as we know it came into being, man's thoughts and feelings were expressed through noises, movement and gesture. Early research carried out in the 1950s by Albert Mehrabian, a researcher in body language, showed that in most cases today communication is still, on average, 45% verbal and 55% non-verbal. So it is not only how you say things, but also what your body is indicating when you say them, for body language is closely linked to thought and feeling. That's why telephone calls and emails are not as satisfactory as speaking to someone face to face, for you're not able to gauge their non-verbal reaction to what you're saying.

# 18 CREATIVE DRAMA

## what this chapter covers...

With group members now relaxed, concentrating and aware of the fundamentals of acting, it is time to get creative! In this chapter we will look at the value of spontaneity and mime in creating engaging drama from very simple ideas.

## IMPROVISATION AND MIME

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A leader suggesting any form of improvisation or mime may be met by groans and shudders from members who shrink into themselves and exclaim, 'Oh, no. I can't do that!' And maybe even the leader, if he has never tried it for himself, won't realise just how valuable an activity it can be, for it enriches the drama experience and can be most enjoyable. It frees the mind, and confidence grows along with imagination.

If you think about it, many people improvise in a small way every day, without ever realising that's what they are doing. Have you never made up a convincing reason (excuse) when you've been late for an appointment or done something which you shouldn't have done; or improvised a movement by suddenly bending to tie a shoelace (even though you may be wearing slip-ons) when you don't want someone to notice you? Young children improvise all the time. Listen to them play in a Wendy House or round a dressing up box, or watch them use a cardboard box in so many different ways.

## IMPROVISATION

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**Improvisation in its simplest form is acting spontaneously, using memory recall and your imagination, everyday language and physical movement – and making it up as you go along.** That's all it is. But in a drama group situation it's great fun and a

# 19 IMPROVISED DRAMA

## what this chapter covers...

In this final chapter, we draw together all the skills learned in this section of the book. Here participants are given starting points for a huge variety of drama improvisations which will test what they have learned and help them to develop even further.

## IMPROVISED DRAMA

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This section is a logical progression from mime and many, in fact, find the activities easier to do because they can speak! Now that dialogue comes into play, the scope for drama widens considerably. Players have more freedom to experiment and the resulting scenes have an added depth of thought and emotion, as well as more interplay of relationships – not only in the scene but between the participants themselves. The examples given have all been found to work and if presented as cards (such as those illustrated), can be used over a period of time.

## INDIVIDUAL ACTIVITIES

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The following ideas encourage spontaneity and confidence because everyone works at once, and each knows that he's less likely to be noticed or his voice heard. The result may be noisy, but as leader, you can monitor what's happening and occasionally stop the group, to watch or listen to someone who is willing to show his work.

### CONVERSATIONS

Everyone finds a space and imagines that they have a mobile phone in their pockets. On the signal, each 'answers' his phone and carries on a conversation. We only hear one side, of course, but his words and attitude should be so convincing that the listener can guess what the conversation's about – which is what members do when they're asked to stop to watch someone continue his phone call.