



# How to Improvise



# a Full-Length Play



*The Art of Spontaneous Theater*

KENN ADAMS

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**a Full-Length Play**

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## DEDICATION

**To Laura Livingston, Michael Durkin, and the fabulous improvisers of Freestyle Repertory Theater . . .** now, then, and always.

**To Ruby,** my mom, for her unconditional love and support.

**To Heather Adams,** my beautiful daughter, who fills me, each day, with the magic of make-believe.



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**I've never met an artist** like Kenn Adams. We worked together in several of his plays including *Les Masquerades* and *Cunning Cappuccino*, the first a brilliant pastiche of Molière and the second an equally brilliant takeoff on Commedia dell'Arte.

He's funny. And he can instinctively look at a play genre, break the structure down into essential parts, and then reconstruct it into something that not only makes me laugh out loud but also, like Alan Ayckbourn's work, delights me with its genius and understanding. I'd travel anywhere to see a production of his first play, *Once Upon a Time There Was A Family . . .*, written when he was in high school, a door-slamming farce about middle America where the characters narrate their own actions.

We worked together in the improvisation company Freestyle Repertory Theater. His understanding of what makes a play work was key in developing a variety of our improvised full-length formats: comedies, dramas, mysteries, and musicals. *The Next Big Broadway Musical*, a one-act musical improv based on this work, is still running in New York City.

I'm thrilled that he has written it all down at last. This *Play by Play* structure has spread and is being used in companies around the world. And now, here it is. Enjoy, enjoy.

—**DAN DIGGLES**, author of *Improv for Actors*

December 20, 2006



## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

**I am deeply indebted** to the gifted improvisers of Freestyle Repertory Theater, who have contributed to the development of this work throughout the course of many years. In addition to the amazing original cast of *Play by Play*, the project has benefited from the inspired talent of Michael Durkin, Kat Koppett, Christine Turner, Sam Cohen, Michael Rock, Debbie Rabbai, Adam Felber, Dan Diggles, and Mark Temares, our inspired lighting improviser.

Most of all, I am indebted to Laura Livingston, the artistic director of Freestyle Repertory Theater. In addition to her sheer intelligence and humbling talent, it is her passion for improvisation, her vision for its great potential, her insistence upon holding it to its highest of possible standards, and her deep respect for the actor's art that have allowed an untested, intellectual concept to blossom into a living, breathing piece of theater.

The cast for the original production of *Play by Play* was Laura Livingston, Hugh Sinclair, Wendy Dillon, Clara Rodriguez, and myself. It was set in a bathroom.



## P R E F A C E

**Think of the greatest play** you have ever seen. Remember how well it was acted, how gracefully directed, how beautifully composed. Remember how ridiculously hard it made you laugh or how deeply and tenderly it allowed you to cry. Remember the characters. Remember the dialogue. Remember the story. And, finally, remember how you felt as you leapt to your feet, hurt your hands from clapping, and screamed yourself hoarse at the curtain call. Pause for a moment, and remember *that play*.

Now, what if that play could be improvised? Well, I'm here to tell you that it can, and that's why I've written this book, to teach the experienced improviser exactly how to do it.

I started improvising in 1989 with New York City's Freestyle Repertory Theater. At the time, however, they called the company TheaterSports New York; and Keith Johnstone's TheaterSports, his brilliant showcase for short-form improvisation, was the only show they performed. I say "they" because my entry-level position with TheaterSports New York was that of the "intern," which basically meant that I sold tickets and ran the concession booth a lot more often than I performed in the shows. From this perspective, then, behind the makeshift bar in the back of the Westside Arts Playhouse, at 11:00 P.M. on Friday nights, I watched this amazing group of actors spontaneously create some of the funniest theater I had ever seen on stage.

The actor part of me was itching to get on stage with them, but the playwright part of me was going nuts. What if they didn't stop improvising after two or three minutes? What if they didn't bring the

lights down on the funniest joke? What if they kept on going and improvised a full-length play?

My passion—my obsession—was born.

In 1990, I joined the company with full performing rights and I brought my idea to Laura Livingston, the group's artistic director. Laura's vision had always been to "innovate the art form of improvisation," and she had every intention of taking the group past TheaterSports. My idea for a full-length improvised play fit right in line with her goals for the company, and she did what she always did—on stage or off—she accepted my offer and made me look good.

I called the show *Play by Play*. The original version was performed in two acts and had a cast of five. Each act was forty-five minutes in length. Each actor played only one character, and the entire show took place in a single location and in real time. We did, however, allow ourselves a time jump in between acts if we felt like taking one. We took suggestions at the top of the show, regarding either the title or the relationship between the main characters, but not during the show.

The reason for the strict set of rules was to force us to develop our narrative muscles. Short-form improvisation provides many "narrative escapes" such as time jumps (Cut to two years later!), space jumps (Cut to the Oval Office!), abandoned characters (Oh, she died!), and the ever merciful "fade to black" from the lighting improviser. Our goal was to take away these short-form escape routes and learn to make a play.

However, we soon discovered that the Play by Play Structural Map—the tool that I developed in order to improvise a solid dramatic structure—is not bound to this original format. Rather, it has proven to be a road map for telling a sound dramatic story, and it works in a two-minute play as well as a two-hour play; a play in which all of the actors portray only one character as well as a play

in which one actor portrays all of the characters; and a play in one location as well as a play in a million locations. It just works. In fact, as we have learned through experience, the more innovative and nontraditional the format, the more important it is to have a strong narrative underpinning holding it all together.

Thanks to the brilliance of my original cast, our initial efforts exceeded my wildest expectations. In 1991, Sy Syna, writing for BackStage, reviewed a performance of the show and observed:

. . . it's the skill and aplomb of these latter-day commedia dell'arte performers; their artful use of props, both real and imaginary; and the effortless way they seem to set up scenes, exits and entrances that had the packed audience laughing and cheering. (BackStage, 1991)

So, if you ever need a favor from me, start by saying that.

In my little world, Play by Play had arrived, and I knew that my passion and obsession would become my career. In the sixteen years since, I have continued to teach, direct, perform, and refine my unique approach to the full-length improvised play. I have taught the Play by Play approach to hundreds and hundreds of professional improvisers, students of improvisation at every level, and even school children as young as eight years old. My methodology continues to form the structural core of many of Freestyle Repertory Theater's innovative long-form show structures. And, currently, I continue to teach and direct the methods presented in this book with Synergy Theater, the San Francisco-based performance, training, and development center for long-form improvisation ([www.synergy-theater.com](http://www.synergy-theater.com)).

Further, I am proud to have discovered that many of the exercises and theories that I developed for Play by Play and that are in this book, such as the Story Spine, have been embraced and adopted

by improv companies, playwrights, directors, college professors, and even corporate-training instructors throughout the country and around the world. Rebecca Stockley, cofounder of San Francisco's prestigious BATS Improv, former dean of its School of Improv, and inspired corporate communications and creativity trainer, has flattered me to no end by printing the Story Spine on the back of her business cards and by using the exercise in every improv class she teaches.

Improvisation can be so much more than short games of skill and gag-oriented sketches that black out the lights on the next big laugh. Improvisation can be anything you want it to be! For those who want improvisation to be an exceptional piece of legitimate theater, for those who want improvisation to be real characters in a real play, and for those who want improvisation to have every possible chance of offering their audience not just a couple of really good laughs but—in fact—the greatest play they have ever seen, I have written this book.

**Yeah, you should.** Right away, it will tell you:

- What you'll find in the book
- Who can benefit from the book
- How to use the book
- How I developed the Play by Play approach to improvising a full-length play

Besides, you're already done with the first paragraph, and it starts off with a fun, little hook.

### **What You'll Find in the Book**

This book will present a step-by-step method for learning how to improvise a complete, full-length play. It will address:

- Cause and Effect storytelling
- Raising the dramatic stakes
- The dramatic structure of a play
- How to improvise and remain spontaneous within that dramatic structure
- How to improvise long, Substantial Scenes with strong character objectives and productive Dramatic Conflict
- How to create characters that support the narrative
- How to create settings and environments that serve as catalysts for the action of the play
- How to use symbolism and metaphor to enrich the fabric of the drama

Each section will be accompanied by exercises that immediately allow your group to begin practicing and developing the

required skills. The exercises are sequential, each one building on the skills developed in the previous exercise.

### **Who Can Benefit from the Book?**

- Professional and student improvisers who want to improvise a full-length play
- Improvisers who are not yet ready to improvise a full-length play but want to improve upon certain areas such as storytelling, character, environment, or advanced scene work
- College and high-school improvisation and theater teachers who are looking to bring an advanced improvisation curriculum into the classroom
- Playwrights, screenwriters, and television writers who are interested in a unique approach to mastering dramatic structure
- Actors who are interested in exploring the structure of a play from their characters' points of view
- Directors who are interested in analyzing dramatic structure and character motivation
- Educators of all levels who are interested in an innovative approach to bringing theater and the English-language arts into the classroom

### **How to Use the Book**

It's best to read the entire book before beginning to experiment with the exercises. Important topics are introduced gradually and returned to several times throughout the book, each time revealing deeper levels of exploration and development. Not until the end of the book will all of the pieces be thoroughly explored and placed in their proper context.

After reading the entire book, start again at the beginning and work through the exercises in the order in which they're presented. On the basis of the progress of your group, spend as much or as little time on each exercise as required to master it thoroughly. By the end of the book, you'll be improvising plays.

## **How I Developed the Play by Play Approach to Improvising a Full-Length Play**

Before I started improvising, I had been writing plays for several years. My plays were being produced on the university and off-Broadway level, and I was wrapping up two degrees from NYU's Tisch School of the Arts, a BFA from its dramatic-writing program and an MFA from its musical-theater program (writing it, not singing it!).

The best book that I had ever read about playwriting was called *Playwriting, How to Write for the Theater* by Bernard Grebanier (Harper and Row, 1979). It is still the best book that I have ever read about playwriting, and I highly recommend it to anyone with an interest in the theater.

In his book, Mr. Grebanier presents what he calls "the proposition." The proposition is a formula for constructing the plot of a well-made play. The proposition is so effective because it was created through a descriptive process rather than a prescriptive process. That is, it is not the result of Mr. Grebanier's personal opinion about what makes a great play. It is the result of a thorough analysis of a vast number of written plays that have proven to be valued by society and loved by audiences over long periods of time. By analyzing the acknowledged masterpieces of the art form, Mr. Grebanier was able to identify their structural commonalities and present it as a formula through the use of his proposition.

The proposition is perfect for playwrights but not entirely useful for improvisers, because it requires you to start in the middle of your story and build the outline of your plot in reverse. My idea was to adapt Mr. Grebanier's proposition into a tool that would allow improvisers to start improvising a play at the beginning of the story and to spontaneously work their way straight through to the end. Thus creating a map, if you will, of the dramatic landscape that must be crossed in order to reach a satisfying end. And so was born the Play by Play Structural Map, which forms the centerpiece of this book.

There! You're done with the introduction.

# Improvisation

**This is a book for experienced** improvisers who are interested in learning how to improvise a full-length play. While I hope it contains information that is valuable to improvisers of all levels, I will not spend a great deal of time discussing the very basics of improvisation. However, I would like to establish the approach to improvisation that I use when I perform, teach, and direct. I believe it is the best approach to improvisation and certainly the best chance of succeeding with a full-length play. I'll also take a minute to discuss the relationship between spontaneity and structure, as it applies to the work in the book.

## The Basics

The majority of my training came from Laura Livingston and Freestyle Repertory Theater. Freestyle Repertory Theater is the New York home for TheaterSports. As such, Laura was greatly influenced by the work of Keith Johnstone, author of the seminal book *Impro.*

Laura taught improvisation through three simple principles:

### ***Be spontaneous!***

Trust your first idea and act on it.

### ***Always make your partner look good.***

Focus on your partner, discover what she needs to be successful, and provide it.

## ***Always say, “Yes!”***

Gladly embrace your partner’s idea and build upon it.

Although there are many other “rules” out there that provide insight and wisdom into the art of improvisation, I have always found the most helpful ones to be variations or corollaries of the three that I learned from Laura. These are the rules that I play by, and this is the approach to improvisation that I’ll assume is at work as we talk about improvising a full-length play.

## **Spontaneity versus Structure**

Improvisation is a constant balance between spontaneity and structure. Even the simplest performance game depends upon shaping our spontaneity into a purposeful form or structure. We do this by imposing restrictions upon it, by restricting the way we can move, the number of words we can use, or the order in which we can speak or by any of the millions of other “rules” that contribute to the phenomenal wealth of “improv games” that have thrilled audiences for years.

Far from being antithetical, structure and spontaneity are the greatest of collaborators. That’s the way improvisation works. We don’t just go on stage and behave spontaneously; we go on stage and we shape our spontaneity into an image, a scene, a song, a dance, a sonnet, a free-form exploration of a theme, or any other species of the performing arts that we care to take on. It’s the spontaneity that allows us to perform, but it’s the shape we choose that turns it into art.

In our case, we have chosen the shape of a well-made play. The structure is intricate, and to use it as a shape for improvisation is challenging. At first, it is bound to feel cumbersome and restrictive, complicated and burdensome. Initially, your spontaneity during rehearsals will suffer as you practice identifying the dramatic

landmarks of the Play by Play Structural Map and navigating your story from point to point. You will very likely feel awkward and wooden. You may feel that your characters are stiff and artificial, your dialogue forced, and your stories uninventive. You may find it very difficult to be in the moment while simultaneously monitoring and tending to the needs of the plot, and you may conclude that the process I propose is too analytical to allow for the type of joyous and carefree spontaneity that you love and look forward to on stage. But, it's not. I promise! It just takes practice.

Through experience, I have learned that any time improvisers focus on a new specific skill such as a new game structure, a new literary style or genre, or a new piece of improvisational theory, their spontaneity takes a temporary backseat to their intellect as they process and integrate the new information. The initial rehearsals and even the next few performances might evidence this. However, once the information is integrated—both on an individual and group level—the spontaneity comes bounding back and the new skill is as easily and instinctually employed as any other that came before it. So will be the case with the Play by Play Structural Map. And, once that happens, you will be amazed.

You will be empowered to improvise on a level that you never thought possible. You will reach a point where you no longer struggle between your initial instinct and a well-told story; a well-told story will be your initial instinct. You will reach a point where you no longer struggle to fill ten minutes on stage; ten minutes on stage will hardly seem time enough to develop your character and endow your environment. And, you will reach a point where you no longer feel burdened by the demands of the structure; the demands of the structure will be a comfortable and inspiring terrain that you deftly transverse as you create your masterpiece. Trust me! I've seen it a million times. I promise!

All right, then. Let's get started.



# Getting Started

**This chapter will introduce** the two most essential tools for building an improvised narrative: Cause and Effect and Raising the Dramatic Stakes.

## Cause and Effect

The first thing to think about is Cause and Effect. What just happened? Mary entered the room. Now, what can happen as a result of that? She startles Bob. What can happen as a result of that? Bob drops a vase. And there it is, Cause and Effect. This causes that, that causes this, and this causes that.

Mary entered the room.

Because Mary entered the room, she startled Bob.

Because she startled Bob, Bob dropped the vase.

### ***Exercise #1: Because . . .***

This is an effective exercise for practicing Cause and Effect. The group improvises a story with each player contributing the next line. Each line begins with the word because, reiterates the previous offer, and then contributes the next. Do it fast and have fun! Here's an example:

*Player 1: Mary took flying lessons.*

*Player 2: Because Mary took flying lessons, she earned her pilot's license.*

*Player 3: Because she earned her pilot's license, her father allowed her to fly the family airplane.*

*Player 4: Because her father allowed her to fly the family airplane, she flew it across the Atlantic Ocean.*

*Player 5: Because she flew it across the Atlantic Ocean, she was caught in a horrible sea storm.*

*Player 1: Because she was caught in a horrible sea storm, her airplane was struck by lightning!*

*Player 2: Because her airplane was struck by lightning, her engines exploded.*

*Player 3: Because her engines exploded, she grabbed her parachute and leapt for her life. (Etc.)*

## **A TIP FOR SUCCESS:**

*Be spontaneous! Shout out your offer before you know how it's going to end. Imagine that the first part of your offer, the repetitive part, is a diving board, and the second part of your offer, the new material, is the dive. Close your eyes, race across the diving board, and leap into the air!*

## **Exercise #2: The Causal Carousel**

To practice making Cause and Effect offers in the context of a scene, try the Causal Carousel. Every scene is thirty seconds in length. Player 1 and player 2 perform scene A. Player 2 and player 3 perform scene B. Scene B must be caused directly by scene A. Player 3 and player 4 perform scene C. Scene C must be caused directly by scene B. Player 4 and player 5 perform scene D. Scene D must be caused directly by scene C. And, finally, player 5 and player 1 perform scene E. Scene E must be caused directly by scene D. Here's an example:

## **SCENE A**

*Player 1: Hello, Blanch, please sit down.*

*Player 2: Thank you, Ms. Rodgers.*

*Player 1: Blanch, I'm promoting you to management.*

*Player 2: Finally! Thank you, Ms. Rodgers, thank you!*

*Player 1: You're welcome. Now, Blanch, I need you to fire Ned Pumpy.*

*Player 2: Ned Pumpy! But, he's been here longer than I have.*

*Player 1: Blanch, are you suited for management or not?*

*Player 2: Oh, I am, Ms. Rodgers, I am!*

*Player 1: All right, then. Fire Ned Pumpy.*

## **SCENE B**

*Player 2: Hello, Ned. May I step into your office?*

*Player 3: Certainly, Blanch. Come in. Sit down.*

*Player 2: Ned, Ms. Rodgers just promoted me to management.*

*Player 3: Oh, god! Please don't fire me!*

*Player 2: I'm sorry, Ned, I have no choice.*

*Player 3: But, Blanch. I have a wife. I have a kid.*

*Player 2: I'm sorry, Ned. You're fired.*

## **SCENE C**

*Player 3: Honey, I'm home.*

*Player 4: Ned? What are you doing home? It's only 3:00.*

*Player 3: Well—*

*Player 4: They fired you, didn't they?*

*Player 3: Well—*

*Player 4: I knew it! Those ingrates! And after you've given them the best years of your life. Well, we're not going to let them get away with it!*

*Player 3: But, honey, what can we do?*

*Player 4: Oh, we'll do something all right. We'll do something!*

## **SCENE D**

*Player 4: Excuse me, is this where they broadcast the evening news?*

*Player 5: Yes, it is. And I'm Ben Bradley, the tenacious, investigative television news reporter. Can I help you?*

*Player 4: Yes, my husband was fired from his job after twenty-seven years of dedicated service. It's age discrimination, I tell you, age discrimination! And I want justice!*

*Player 5: Age discrimination, is it?*

*Player 4: Yes, will you help?*

*Player 5: You bet I will. Now, you just go back home and turn on your television at six o'clock sharp!*

## **SCENE E**

*Player 5: Good evening, ladies and gentlemen. I'm Ben Bradley, and this is the Six O'clock News. Tonight I am broadcasting live from the office of Abigail Rodgers, in the corporate headquarters of Rodgers, Fitzpatrick, and Mulch, where the filth of age discrimination has settled its slimy dust upon a once most venerable reputation. Abigail Rodgers, was Ned Pumply fired because he was simply too old?*

*Player 1: Ben, that's ridiculous. Mr. Pumply was fired because . . .*

*Player 5: Yes, Ms. Rodgers? America is waiting.*

*Player 1: Because I love him! I love him! I love him!  
I love him! And I just couldn't take it anymore.  
Looking at him every day. Knowing that, at  
night, he went home to another. Oh, Ned. Oh,  
my little Neddy-Weddy. I'm so sorry. Please  
forgive me.*

*Player 5: And there you have it, folks. I'm Ben Bradley,  
and this is the Six O'clock News.*

### **A TIP FOR SUCCESS:**

*Tip the domino! Make an offer that guarantees a consequence in the following scene. For example, when player 1 orders player 2 to fire Ned Pumply, she is "tipping the domino" by purposely causing a specific event that has to take place in the following scene. This is a great gift to players 2 and 3 because they don't have to worry about setting up a scene. All they have to do is allow their domino to be knocked over by accepting the offer from player 1.*

A good way to test the success of your Causal Carousel is to see whether the major beats can be related in the form of a Because . . . exercise. Let's put our example, above, to the test:

Ms. Rodgers promotes Mary and orders her to fire Ned Pumply.

Because Ms. Rodgers promotes Mary and orders her to fire Ned Pumply, Mary fires Ned Pumply.

Because Mary fires Ned Pumply, Ned goes home early.

Because Ned goes home early, his wife discovers that he has been fired.

Because his wife discovers that he has been fired, she vows to do something about it.

Because she vows to do something about it, she goes to the local news station and accuses Ned's firm of age discrimination.

Because she goes to the local news station and accuses Ned's firm of age discrimination, Ben Bradley exposes Ms. Rodgers on the *Six O'clock News*.

Because Ben Bradley exposes Ms. Rodgers on the *Six O'clock News*, Ms. Rodgers breaks down and admits that she's in love with Ned.

Improvising with a Cause and Effect mindset makes for great improvisation because:

- You ensure that you are focusing on your partner.
- You ensure that you are accepting, or saying, "Yes!" to your partner's offer.
- You ensure that you are not only accepting but also building upon, or saying, "Yes, and . . .!" to your partner's offer.
- You ensure that you are making your partner's offer an essential part of the story.
- You ensure that you are serving the story by making the next most logical and spontaneous offer.

Finally, Cause and Effect is an essential ingredient for a satisfying story and a well-constructed play. It is the engine that drives the narrative and propels the characters, inexorably, toward their eventual destinies. It is the fabric of the unique reality that binds these particular characters and these particular events into a cohesive and identifiable whole. It is the primary law. It is the physics, the logic, and the justice system by which the world of the drama is governed. In the world of the drama, actions have consequences,

and the fate of the characters is determined, unalterably, by the choices they make and the actions they take. It is inescapable. This causes that, that causes this, and this causes that.

Now, of course, not every single, solitary event that happens in a play or a story is a direct result of the event that precedes it. There are times when it is necessary to put the sequence of Cause and Effect on hold for a moment. This is usually done in order to introduce some necessary expository information such as a new character or a new beat of action. In those instances, however, the new addition to the story must eventually be incorporated into the whole—like a foreign object being drawn into the center of a vortex—and take its inevitable place in the clockwork mechanism of the plot. Otherwise, the new addition will be superfluous to the story and a distraction to the audience.

### **Raising the Dramatic Stakes**

The next thing to think about is raising the dramatic stakes. To raise the dramatic stakes is to get our characters into danger by increasing the risk of a given situation. There are two different ways of increasing the risk:

1. By increasing the amount that is at risk
2. By increasing the odds of it all being lost

For example, if Jennifer is nervous about her first date with Robert, we can raise the dramatic stakes by increasing the amount at risk. We can make Robert the most popular boy in school. We can also raise the dramatic stakes by increasing the odds of it all being lost. We can smite poor Jennifer with a sudden outbreak of scabby, red hives.

#### ***Exercise #3: Combination Stake***

This is a quick, little drill to become familiar with the two methods of raising the dramatic stakes: increasing the amount at

risk and increasing the odds of it all being lost. Player 1 makes an opening offer, player 2 raises the stakes by increasing the amount at risk, and player 3 raises the stakes, again, by increasing the odds of it all being lost. For example:

*Player 1: Jasmine was walking through the woods.*

*Player 2: Her infant child was sleeping in her arms.*

*Player 3: The wolves began to howl.*

Notice how player 2 increases the amount that Jasmine has at risk by introducing her vulnerable infant and how player 3 increases the odds of it all being lost by introducing the threat of the wolves. Here's another example:

*Player 1: Renee joined the army.*

*Player 2: Succeeding in the military was the only way to win the approval of her mother, Lieutenant Colonel Marjorie Mack.*

*Player 3: Renee hated the military.*

Again, player 1 increases the amount at risk by adding the approval of Renee's mother as something that stands to be lost, and player 3 increases the odds of it all being lost by endowing Renee with a hatred of the military. Here's a final example:

*Player 1: Cynthia bought a gourmet coffee shop.*

*Player 2: To do so, she sacrificed her lucrative career as a stockbroker.*

*Player 3: The state in which she owned her business became a no-caffeine state.*

See if you can analyze the final example, as I've done for the previous two.

### **A TIP FOR SUCCESS:**

*Fast, fun, and . . . fast! Improvise first and analyze later!*

Notice how exciting it is when the dramatic stakes are raised in successive offers. The tension mounts, and the audience is gripped.

***Exercise #4: As If That Wasn't Enough . . .***

This is a fun way to practice raising the dramatic stakes in a series of successive offers. Player 1 makes a simple statement that introduces a character and a situation. Each successive offer starts with the phrase, “And, as if that wasn't enough . . .” and raises the dramatic stakes of all that came before it.

Here are a few examples:

*Player 1: Allison was late for work.*

*Player 2: And, as if that wasn't enough, she was supposed to be there early for an important meeting with her boss.*

*Player 3: And, as if that wasn't enough, she had already been late for work three times that week.*

*Player 4: And, as if that wasn't enough, her boss has already threatened to fire her if she showed up late for work just one more time.*

*Player 5: And, as if that wasn't enough, she was a single mom with three kids, and she really, really, really needed her job.*

Notice how each new offer raises the dramatic stakes by increasing the risk that is connected with being late. In this example, the first three offers, from players 2, 3, and 4, are examples of increasing the odds that all will be lost, and the final offer, from player 5, is an example of increasing the amount at risk. Either approach is perfectly acceptable at any time.

Notice that each new offer is born logically and naturally from the offer before. As always, the best offers are those that are built directly upon the previous one.

Notice, also, that in the example above, the result is not a narrative. It is, instead, an exploration of a single moment in time. It's helpful, at first, to impose that restriction upon the exercise in order to ensure that each new offer is raising the dramatic stakes of the original sentence.

Another version of the exercise would ask each offer to both raise the stakes and advance the narrative. Here's an example of that:

*Player 1: Margaret invested her family's life savings in a start-up business proposition.*

*Player 2: As if that wasn't enough, Fred, her husband, became angry because she did not consult with him first.*

*Player 3: And, as if that wasn't enough, Fred went on to tell Margaret that he was sick and tired of her irresponsible get-rich-quick schemes, and he reminded her of the last three times that she lost the family's life savings.*

*Player 4: And, as if that wasn't enough, their daughter, Judy, came home and announced that she had been accepted to a really prestigious Ivy League college at the cost of a hundred thousand dollars a year.*

*Player 5: And, as if that wasn't enough, Fred told Margaret that if she loses their money, and they cannot afford to send Judy to school, he would have no choice but to consider a divorce.*

*Player 1: And, as if that wasn't enough, when Judy realized that her mother had invested all of their money in another one of her irresponsible get-rich-quick schemes and that she might not be able to go to the prestigious Ivy League college, she broke out into tears and ran*

*upstairs to her bedroom screaming, "I hate you! I hate you! I hate you!!"*

*Player 2: And, as if that wasn't enough, when Margaret arrived at her new office she discovered that Brenda, her business partner, had embezzled all the money and skipped out of the country. (Etc.)*

So, in this example, each offer not only increases the risk of Margaret's business decision but also advances the narrative by moving the story through time.

We spoke at the end of our section on Cause and Effect about instances during which the sequence of Cause and Effect might be put on hold in order to introduce a new character. In the example above, we do exactly that when we bring Judy into the scene. Notice that Judy's entrance is not caused by the fight that her mother and father are having about the investment. However, by coming in at that time with the news that she has been accepted to an expensive college, she is making a great dramatic decision because she is raising the dramatic stakes of the situation on stage. She is increasing the amount that Margaret has at risk by adding her prestigious education to the pot.

Then, as required, the sequence of Cause and Effect resumes, and Judy is folded in:

Because Judy came home and made her announcement, she learned that her mother had invested the family's savings in another one of her irresponsible get-rich-quick schemes.

Because she learned that her mother had invested the family's savings in another one of her irresponsible get-rich-quick schemes, she became infuriated with her mother.

Because she became infuriated with her mother, she broke out into tears and ran upstairs to her

bedroom screaming, “I hate you! I hate you!  
I hate you!!”

Like improvising with a Cause and Effect mindset, making offers that raise the dramatic stakes is an exceptional way to ensure that you are improvising well, by focusing on your partners, building upon their offers, and making your partners look good by taking what might have been a rather ordinary offer and making it tremendously important to the story.

Here’s another exercise to practice making improvisational offers that raise the dramatic stakes:

### ***Exercise #5: Ah, but There’s So Much at Risk!***

Player 1 makes a simple offer that establishes the relationship and introduces a situation. Player 2 responds with a monologue that must include the phrase, “Ah, but there is so much at risk!” Here are some examples:

*Player 1: Okay, lady, where do you want the couch?*

*Player 2: Over there. No, over there! No, I mean. . . !  
Ah, but there is so much at risk! If I place it  
incorrectly and Madame Brulé is displeased,  
I shall be fired as her interior decorator! I shall  
be ruined! Disgraced! Disgraced! All right, put  
it there. Put it right . . . over . . . there.*

*Player 1: Your Highness, I have returned from France.*

*Player 2: Rudolph, We did not expect you for another  
week. Quick, then, tell us her response. Ah,  
but there is so much at risk! Do we dare to  
hear it? Do we dare to learn whether we shall  
ever know true happiness? Do we dare to  
learn whether we are loved where we are bold  
enough to love? Do we dare to learn whether*

*she shall have us as her husband? Out with it, Rudolph. How did she respond?*

*Player 1: Here's that report you asked for, Ms. Feinbloom.*

*Player 2: Thank you, Peter. Ah, but there is so much at risk! By analyzing this report, I shall know for certain whether Ms. Apex is guilty of embezzlement. And if she is, Peter, I'll have no other choice but to turn her in and destroy the woman who has given me everything.*

### **Tips for Success:**

*Player 2 should be careful to raise the dramatic stakes without making player 1 look bad, wrong, or stupid. For example, if Ms. Feinbloom responded to Peter by saying, "Yes, but I needed it by nine o'clock! You're twenty minutes late. Jesus, why can't you ever do anything right? Ah, but there's so much at risk! If I don't get the results of this report to Ms. Apex by 11:30, we'll lose the deal, you idiot!!!" The stakes would be raised, but there would now be an extremely negative energy between player 1 and player 2, and this frequently leads to poor improvisation. As we have seen from the three examples above, that type of negativity just simply isn't necessary. Also, be spontaneous! Launch into the monologue without having any idea how the phrase "Ah, but there's so much at risk!" will find a way in. Just trust that it will.*

### **Exercise #6: Raising the Stakes by Entering a Scene**

Player 1 and player 2 improvise a thirty-second scene. Player 3 enters and brings in an offer that raises the stakes of the scene. Here's an example:

*Player 1: Mother, I have come to a decision.*

*Player 2: Yes, Masha. What have you decided?*

*Player 1: I am leaving Russia. I am going to America.*

*Player 2: Masha! What type of nonsense is this?*

*Player 1: Mother, there is nothing here for me! I have talent, Mother, and I wish to dance on Broadway!*

(Enter, player 3)

*Player 3: (Shouting outside, as he enters.) Agh! I spit upon your house, Boris Notnakov!*

*Player 1: Papa!*

*Player 2: Ivan, what is it?*

*Player 3: Our neighbor, Boris Notnakov! He is a traitor to the motherland! He is taking his family, and he is leaving Russia! From this minute on, he is dead to us!*

Player 3 (the father) has raised the dramatic stakes by increasing the amount at risk for player 1 (Masha). She is now risking incurring her father's wrath and losing his love and protection.

### **A TIP FOR SUCCESS:**

*Focus on your partner! Player 3, be sure that you're watching the scene on stage rather than trying to think of "creative" and "interesting" ways to raise the dramatic stakes. Just focus on your partners, watch what they're doing, and build upon that. Remember, your job is to make them look good by raising the dramatic stakes of their situation, not to make yourself look good by entering the action and stealing the scene.*

In exercise #6, you practiced raising the dramatic stakes by entering a scene in progress and quickly increasing the risk. Now,

you'll practice raising the dramatic stakes by establishing an entirely new scene.

### ***Exercise #7: Raising the Stakes in a Successive Scene***

Players 1 and 2 improvise scene A. They exit. Players 3 and 4 enter and improvise scene B, in which they raise the dramatic stakes for the characters in scene A. Here's an example:

#### **SCENE A**

*Player 1: It's beautiful, Andrew. Everything in this charming, old cottage is just as you've described it.*

*Player 2: Thank you, Millicent. I want you to be comfortable. And please, stay as long you like.*

*Player 1: Oh, Andrew. Are you certain that your aunt won't mind? It is her cottage, after all, and I'd hate to keep her from enjoying it.*

*Player 2: Nonsense, Aunt Agatha never comes east to Connecticut during this time of the year. She won't even know that you're using it.*

*Player 1: Andrew, you haven't even told her!?*

*Player 2: There isn't any need. She knows I have the key, and she trusts me implicitly.*

*Player 1: Andrew, I don't know how to thank you. Without a peaceful retreat such as this, I don't think I'd ever be able to finish writing my book.*

*Player 2: Nonsense, Millicent. Anything at all I can ever do to help. Besides, you know, my motivation is not completely altruistic. You said, in November, that once you have completed your manuscript, you'd be ready to consider my marriage proposal.*

*Player 1: Andrew, I . . . I said that I could not even think of such things . . .*

*Player 2: Until after the book.*

*Player 1: And you promised . . .*

*Player 2: Yes, that I'd let the matter drop.*

*Player 1: Yes, exactly.*

*Player 2: And I have. And I will.*

*Player 1: Andrew . . .*

*Player 2: Nonsense, forget that I mentioned it. Please, just finish the book.*

*Player 1: Andrew, I enjoy our relationship very much. But I'm not at all sure that I want to get married. Ever. To anyone.*

*Player 2: I know, Millicent. And I know that you aren't in love with me as I am with you.*

*Player 1: Andrew . . .*

*Player 2: But I do think you love me a little. And I think that in time, that love will grow and blossom. And I just want to stick around long enough to see if I'm right. Now, please. Just enjoy the cottage. And—*

*Player 1: I know. Finish the book.*

(Pause.)

*Player 2: Come, I'll show you the view from the patio.*

(They exit. Enter players 3 and 4.)

## **SCENE B**

*Player 3: Well, this is it.*

*Player 4: Nice. Really nice. Agatha Trimble, I am very impressed.*

*Player 3: Well, thank you, Jonathan.*

*Player 4: And nobody else gets the run of this place?*

*Player 3: Oh, my nephew has a key, but he hardly makes use of it. Gosh. What would he say if he knew that his old Aunt Agatha was being romanced, right here in the cabin, by a boy his own age?*

*Player 4: Twenty-nine, and I'm still a boy?*

*Player 3: Jonathan, sweetie, I'm fifty-three.*

*Player 4: Well, I hope I don't remind you too much of your nephew. I'd hate for you to be thinking about him instead of me.*

*Player 3: Oh, no. He's really nothing like you. He's wonderful, of course, but . . . Oh, you know. He's kind of plain looking, and never had much luck with the ladies. They tend to like him as a friend and never very much more. He surely never swept 'em off their feet the way that you seem to do.*

*Player 4: Me? Look, I hate to disappoint you, but I'm no Casanova. I just really like you.*

*Player 3: Sweetie, you're a very bad liar. I'm the fourth lady this week that you've picked up at the country club. We girls tend to talk, you know. Now, I'll admit that the others were all under thirty, and so you probably think I have a whole bunch of money someplace. But, that's why I brought you here. So, you wouldn't use that bad-boy sex-appeal of yours to dive back into the young and pretty set before you figured out your mistake.*

*Player 4: Hey, you really believe all that?*

*Player 3: What? That you're probably after some money? That if a beautiful, young girl were*

*running around here, you'd drop me like a hot potato? Yes, dear boy, I really do. Which is why we are secluded in the mountains. Now, shall we go upstairs?*

*Player 4: You're wrong, you know. You're wrong about everything.*

*Player 3: Yeah. We'll see. Come on.*

So, player 3 and player 4 have raised the dramatic stakes for players 1 and 2 by increasing their risk. First, they increase the odds of Andrew losing it all, regarding his love for Millicent, by endowing him as “kind of plain looking,” as someone who “never had much luck with the ladies,” and as the type of guy that women tend to “like . . . as a friend and never very much more.” Then, they further increase the odds of Andrew losing it all by introducing a new guy who has all of the sex appeal and success that Andrew lacks with women. For Millicent, they increase her risk by introducing a character, with dubious intentions, who is likely to seduce her.

### **A TIP FOR SUCCESS:**

*Let scene B develop at a natural and comfortable pace. Don't feel the need to raise the stakes of scene A in the first few offers of scene B or to know before you even begin scene B exactly how the task is to be accomplished. Rather, just relax into the scene, have one or two thoughts in the back of your mind, and discover the rest together with your partner on stage.*

Along with Cause and Effect, raising the dramatic stakes is a critical skill for improvising a full-length play.

# The Structure of a Full-Length Play

**At the heart of every play** is a well-constructed story with a beginning, a middle, and an end. The Beginning is separated from The Middle by an event that I call The First Significant Event, and The Middle is separated from The End by another event that I call The Climax. So, the first evolution of our structural map for a full-length play looks like this:

Beginning  
First Significant Event  
Middle  
Climax  
End

## The Beginning

The Beginning establishes The Foundation of the story by introducing important expository material such as the time, the place, the characters, and the context. However, the most important function of The Beginning is to clearly establish the routine. What is life like, for the main characters, on an ordinary day when nothing unusual is happening?

The Beginning is usually about 25 percent of the entire story. In a two-hour play, that's anywhere between twenty and forty minutes.

## The First Significant Event

The First Significant Event is a single action that breaks the routine. It destroys The Foundation, and it thrusts the characters irrevocably into the unknown. It ends The Beginning and begins The Middle.

## The Middle

In The Middle, the characters are faced with the consequences of having broken their routine. Thrust into the unknown, they encounter difficulties and struggle against them in order to succeed.

The Middle is about 50 percent of the entire play, but this approximation varies quite a bit. In a two-hour play, The Middle can be anywhere from forty-five minutes to an hour and forty-five minutes.

## The Climax

The Climax is a single action that sets the characters upon their final path toward success or failure. It ends The Middle and begins The End.

## The End

In The End, the characters either succeed or fail in their efforts to overcome their difficulties, and a new routine is established. The End is the remaining 25 percent or so of the entire play, up to half an hour in a two-hour show.

Here's our first evolution of the structural map again, along with the core function of each section:

### STRUCTURAL MAP, FIRST EVOLUTION

### CORE FUNCTION

#### Beginning

The Foundation is built, and the routine is established.

#### First Significant Event

The routine is broken, and The Foundation is destroyed.

<b>Middle</b>	The characters face the consequences of having broken their routine. They encounter difficulties and struggle against them to survive.
<b>Climax</b>	The characters embark toward success or failure.
<b>End</b>	The characters either succeed or fail, a new Foundation is built, and a new routine is established.

### ***Exercise #8: The Story Spine\****

The Story Spine is an excellent exercise for learning how to build a well-constructed story. Simply improvise the endings to each of the following sentence starters:

Once upon a time . . .

Every day . . .

But one day . . .

Because of that . . .

Because of that . . .

Because of that . . .

Until finally . . .

And ever since then . . .

This can be done as an individual exercise or in groups, with each player taking the next line. Do it fast and have fun! Here are some quick examples:

*Player 1: Once upon a time there was a frog named Freida who lived in a swamp.*

\*When I first created the Story Spine, it didn't have a name. I simply called it "Once Upon a Time . . ." It was Kat Koppett, formerly of Freestyle Repertory Theater, who dubbed it the Story Spine. Kat has used this exercise to great effectiveness in her innovative corporate-training techniques. She writes about this in her excellent book *Training to Imagine*.

*Player 2: Every day she ate a fly.*

*Player 3: But one day, she ate a grasshopper.*

*Player 4: Because of that, the grasshoppers attacked the frogs.*

*Player 5: Because of that, the frogs fought back, and the flies were caught in the middle.*

*Player 1: Because of that, the Swamp Wars of 2007 were born.*

*Player 2: Until finally, the flies sided with the grasshoppers.*

*Player 3: And ever since then, frogs ate pizza.*

*Player 1: Once upon a time there was an evil king named Rex the Rude.*

*Player 2: Every day he crushed the peasants with injustice and tyranny.*

*Player 3: But one day, Peter the Peasant spoke out and denounced the king.*

*Player 4: Because of that, Rex the Rude had Peter the Peasant arrested.*

*Player 5: Because of that, a spirit of rebellion swelled within the breast of the peasantry.*

*Player 1: Because of that, the peasantry stormed the castle and captured Rex the Rude.*

*Player 2: Until finally, Rex the Rude abdicated his throne in order to secure his release.*

*Player 3: And ever since then, the people were ruled by Peter the Benevolent.*

*Player 1: Once upon a time there was a chief executive officer of a major corporation named Tabitha Jones.*

*Player 2: Every day, she stole the credit for the brilliant ideas of her executive administrative assistant, Mary.*

*Player 3: But one day, Jennifer, Mary's best friend, exposed Ms. Jones for the sham that she was.*

*Player 4: Because of that, Ms. Jones fired both of them.*

*Player 5: Because of that, Jennifer and Mary sued Ms. Jones for wrongful termination.*

*Player 1: Because of that, Ms. Jones became the focus of a national media circus.*

*Player 2: Until finally, she was removed from office by the board of directors.*

*Player 3: And ever since then, Jennifer and Mary have run a very successful nonprofit organization that helps employees sue their bosses.*

Now, let's take a look at how the Story Spine correlates with our current structural map of a well-constructed story:

## **STRUCTURAL MAP**

## **OFFER FROM STORY SPINE**

### **Beginning**

Once upon a time . . .

Every day . . .

### **First Significant Event**

But one day . . .

### **Middle**

Because of that . . .

Because of that . . .

Because of that . . .

### **Climax**

Until, finally . . .

### **End**

And ever since then . . .

Let's analyze our first example in order to demonstrate how each offer fulfills its core function:

<b>OFFER FROM STORY</b>		
<b>STRUCTURAL MAP</b>	<b>SPINE</b>	<b>FUNCTION</b>
<b>Beginning</b>	Once upon a time there was a frog named Freida. Every day, she ate a fly.	The Foundation is built, and the routine is established.
<b>First Significant Event</b>	But one day, she ate a grasshopper.	The routine is broken, and The Foundation is destroyed.
<b>Middle</b>	Because of that, the grasshoppers attacked the frogs. Because of that, the frogs fought back. Because of that, the Swamp Wars of 2007 were born.	The characters face the consequences of having broken their routine. They encounter difficulties and struggle against them to survive.
<b>Climax</b>	Until finally, the flies sided with the grasshoppers.	The characters embark toward success or failure.
<b>End</b>	And ever since then, frogs ate pizza.	The characters either succeed or fail, a new Foundation is built, and a new routine is established.

### **Back to The Beginning**

Let's take a closer look at The Beginning and bring our structural map to the next stage of its evolution. From now on, we'll refer to The Beginning as The Foundation. The Foundation ends with The First Significant Event. So, the second evolution of our structural map of a well-constructed play looks like this:

Foundation  
First Significant Event  
Middle  
Climax  
End

### **A DEEPER LOOK AT THE FOUNDATION**

The Foundation is usually about 25 percent of the entire play. So, in a two-hour play, the first thirty minutes or so is foundation. It's important to note that The Foundation, although its purpose is to establish the routine, is not intended to be dramatically stagnant. When we first began rehearsing *Play by Play*, with the original cast at Freestyle Repertory Theater, we were afraid to make strong, spontaneous offers in The Foundation for fear of breaking, rather than establishing, the routine. We were tiptoeing through The Foundation as if it were a shop full of delicate crystal glassware, afraid to bump into a display case and cause something to break. As a result, we had thirty-minute foundations that did little else than reiterate the information that was established at the very beginning. We were saving the “drama” for The First Significant Event, and our foundations were incredibly dull.

We knew, however, that our favorite plays often had exciting and dramatic foundations that had continuous twists and turns in the plot and that seemed to be breaking routines at every available opportunity. How could this be if, by its very definition, The Foundation must establish the routine rather than break it? The answer is that routines are relative. Remember, The Foundation does not establish what life is like, for most people, on an ordinary day when nothing unusual is happening. It establishes what life is like for your main characters on an ordinary day when nothing unusual is happening. And, to take it one step further, it doesn't establish what life is like for your main characters on any old,

ordinary day when nothing unusual is happening, it establishes what life is like for your main characters on this particular ordinary day on which nothing unusual is happening, the particular day that you have chosen to dramatize.

To demonstrate this, let's take a look at the following Foundation:

Once upon a time there was a brother and sister named Jack and Jill. Every day, they dressed in superhero costumes, flew out the window, defended the earth from alien invaders, got captured by an archenemy, nearly died, escaped his clutches, and defeated the villain.

Now, while this would be unusual for most of us, it would, in fact, be perfectly routine for Jack and Jill if they happened to be a pair of action-adventure superheroes. Routines are relative. While the action described above could, in fact, be material enough for an entire play, if it all happens in The Foundation of your show, then it all becomes the routine and it's up to The First Significant Event to identify it as such, by clearly and decisively breaking it:

But one day, Jack told Jill that he didn't want to be a superhero anymore.

In fact, the reason that I call it The First Significant Event is to imply that it is not the only event or The First Event that occurs in The Foundation. The Foundation is absolutely full of events, exciting and dramatic events at that. It is The First Significant Event because it is the one that breaks the routine as established by all of the dramatic events that have come before it.

## **A DEEPER LOOK AT THE FIRST SIGNIFICANT EVENT**

We know that The First Significant Event breaks the routine of the everyday world and destroys The Foundation of the story. In

addition to that, however, it serves yet another critical function; it identifies the central characters of the play. In order to place this remark in its proper context, I'll need to take a moment to explain what I mean by the "central characters of the play."

There are two central characters; I refer to them as character #1 and character #2. Character #1 is the character whose success or failure must be settled before the story can end. It is the character whose journey the audience is most invested in and whose fate the audience is most concerned with. It is often the title character, or the "starring role," or the protagonist—but not always! And that's the reason that, rather than using any of the previous terms, I say character #1.

Now, a story in a play must have one and only one character #1. If a play has more than one character #1, then that means it has more than one story, each with its own character #1. These additional stories are known as subplots and are very common. For our current purposes, however, we will assume that our play has a single plotline, a single story, and a single character #1.

Now, the reason that the audience cares most about the fate of character #1 and the reason that it is the success or failure of character #1 that must be decided before the story can end is because it is character #1 who causes all the trouble in the first place! It is character #1 who breaks the routine. It is character #1 who destroys *The Foundation*! It is character #1 who commits *The First Significant Event*. And it is character #1 who both the audience and dramatic justice demand be held accountable. It is character #1 who must take responsibility for her own actions by setting things right or, if unable to do so, by perishing in the attempt.

And so, the definition of character #1 is the character that breaks the routine by committing *The First Significant Event*. However, the nature of a play also demands that the fate of character #1 be intertwined with the fate of another character. This second character is often the second character in the title, or the "costar," or

the antagonist—but not always! And that is why, rather than using any of those terms, I refer to this character as character #2.

In order to ensure that the fate of character #1 is inexorably intertwined with the fate of character #2, The First Significant Event must involve the two of them. Specifically, it must be an action committed by character #1, on stage, in the present, and directly upon character #2. And how do we know which character is character #2? Simple, it's the character upon which The First Significant Event has been committed.

This, then, is our formal definition of The First Significant Event: a specific action that breaks the normal routine of the characters' lives as established in The Foundation. It is committed by character #1, on stage, in the present, and directly upon character #2.

In addition to being an important element in the construct of a full-length play, insisting that The First Significant Event be committed by one character directly upon another has a supreme benefit to the improvisers on stage. It ensures, as I'll demonstrate later, that the central conflict of the play is about the relationship between the two central characters. A strong relationship between the two characters on stage—a relationship in which the two characters have strong feelings, strong needs, much at stake, and the ability to profoundly impact the life of the other—is a crucial element to a compelling drama and often a missing element from the stage of improvisation.

Consider the difference between these First Significant Events:

Jason goes to war.

Debbie wins an award.

A volcano erupts and threatens the town.

And these:

Jason tells his mother that he is going off to war.

Debbie beats her husband, Neil, in a contest and wins an award.

Marta rescues Marsha just as the volcano erupts and threatens the town.

Notice how the second set of events raises gripping questions about the characters' relationship. How will Jason's announcement affect his mother? How will Debbie's victory affect her marriage with Neil? How will Marsha feel about Marta now that she owes her so much?

Human beings care about other human beings. An audience will care much more about Jason's affect on his mother than they will about the war, more about Debbie's marriage with Neil than they will about the award that she won, and more about Marsha's sense of obligation to Marta than they will about the lava that is rushing toward the town.

We can now improve upon the core functions, from our previous look at the structural map, by integrating our new understandings:

## **STRUCTURAL MAP, SECOND EVOLUTION**

## **CORE FUNCTION**

### **Foundation**

The central characters' normal routine, in the world of the play, is established.

### **First Significant Event**

Character #1 breaks the routine by committing a specific action, on stage and in the present, directly upon character #2.

### **Middle**

The characters face the consequences of having broken their routine. They encounter difficulties and struggle against them to survive.

**Climax**

The characters embark toward success or failure.

**End**

The characters either succeed or fail, a new Foundation is built, and a new routine is established.

### ***Exercise #9: Breaking Routines***

In this exercise, we simply take the first section of the Story Spine and use it to practice creating Foundations and destroying them with dramatic First Significant Events:

## **STRUCTURAL MAP, SECOND EVOLUTION**

## **STORY SPINE**

**Foundation**

Once upon a time . . .

Every day . . .

**First Significant Event**

But one day . . .

Again, it can be done in a group or done individually. As always, do it fast, have fun, and be spontaneous. Here are some examples and accompanying observations:

*Player 1: Once upon a time, there was a little boy and a little girl.*

*Player 2: Every day, the little boy teased the little girl, and the little girl cried.*

*Player 3: But one day, the little girl punched the little boy and gave him a fat lip.*

The punch clearly satisfies the requirements of The First Significant Event:

- It breaks the routine.
- It's on stage.
- It's in the present.
- It's an action that one character commits directly upon another.

So, the little girl rightfully takes her place as character #1, and the little boy becomes character #2. It is the little girl who broke the routine by finally standing up for herself in the face of the little boy's torments, and it is the little girl's fate with which we are now primarily concerned.

*Player 1: Once upon a time, there was a schoolhouse full of children.*

*Player 2: Every day, the teacher punished Edna for talking in class.*

*Player 3: But one day, Edna came to class and refused to talk to Margie, her best friend.*

By refusing to talk to Margie, Edna breaks the routine of always getting punished for talking in class. Edna becomes character #1, and Margie becomes character #2. Notice that Margie was not even mentioned in the first two lines of the story. This demonstrates that a character need not do anything other than be the recipient of The First Significant Event in order to establish her place as character #2. She needn't even have to appear on stage until the moment The First Significant Event takes place.

*Player 1: Once upon a time, there was a very popular girl named Mary.*

*Player 2: Every day she basked in the glory of her universally accepted popularity.*

*Player 3: But one day, a girl named Daisy challenged Mary to an official popularity contest.*

By challenging Mary to the popularity contest, Daisy becomes character #1, and Mary becomes character #2. If this were an actual full-length play, there could be forty-five minutes of Foundation, in which we see Mary in action, before Daisy enters to challenge her to the contest. Regardless, it is Daisy who becomes character #1, not Mary.

### ***Exercise #10: The Chair of Significance!!!***

This is a fun exercise for developing the ability to recognize when it's time for The First Significant Event and to purposefully make it happen. Two or three players begin to improvise The Foundation of a five-minute play. Since The Foundation is about 25 percent of the entire play, this Foundation should take about a minute and a half. At just about that point, one of the players claims the position of character #1 by standing on a chair, the chair of significance! Character #1 points dramatically at another player, who now becomes character #2. And finally, character #1 delivers a line of dialogue that serves as a clear and unmistakable First Significant Event.

There are several points to the exercise. The first is to develop a feeling for when The Foundation has completed its job. That is, when has the routine been established clearly enough that any further reiteration is unnecessary. That's when it's time for The First Significant Event.

The second point is to practice taking control of the story by observing where it is, deciding where you need it to go, and very deliberately taking it there.

The third point is to drill the notion that The First Significant Event must not only break the routine but must also be committed by character #1 directly upon character #2. (Hence, the dramatic point.)

#### **A TIP FOR SUCCESS:**

*Get a really strong chair!*

### **Onto The Middle**

Okay, settle in.

The Middle has two parts. I call the first part The Foundation Focus, and I call the second part The Foundation Funnel. These two parts are separated by another singular event called The First

Significant Repercussion. The First Significant Repercussion gives rise to something that I call The Question of the Play. And finally, The Middle is brought to an end by The Climax.

Here, then, is the third evolution of our structural map alongside the second evolution in order to show how The Middle has been broken out into The Foundation Focus, The First Significant Repercussion, The Question of the Play, The Foundation Funnel, and The Climax:

**STRUCTURAL MAP,  
SECOND EVOLUTION**

**STRUCTURAL MAP,  
THIRD EVOLUTION**

<b>Foundation</b>	Foundation
<b>First Significant Event</b>	First Significant Event
<b>Middle</b>	Foundation Focus First Significant Repercussion Question of the Play Foundation Funnel
<b>(Climax)</b>	Climax
<b>End</b>	End

Here it is again with as much of the core functions as we have discussed:

**STRUCTURAL MAP,  
THIRD EVOLUTION**

**CORE FUNCTION**

<b>Beginning</b>	Foundation	The central characters' normal routine, in the world of the play, is established.
	First Significant Event	Character #1 breaks the routine by committing a specific action, on stage and in the present, directly upon character #2.

<b>Middle</b>	Foundation Focus	The characters face the consequences of having broken their routine.
	First Significant Repercussion	
	Question of the Play	
	Foundation Funnel	They encounter difficulties and struggle against them to survive.
	Climax	The characters embark toward success or failure.
<b>End</b>	End	The characters either succeed or fail, a new Foundation is built, and a new routine established.

Here's a brief overview of the five units that comprise The Middle:

### **THE FOUNDATION FOCUS**

The Foundation Focus raises the dramatic stakes of The First Significant Event. It robs the characters of their comfortable, well-known routine and propels them into some sort of emotional or physical danger.

### **THE FIRST SIGNIFICANT REPERCUSSION**

The First Significant Repercussion is the final and ultimate consequence of The First Significant Event. It puts the focus of the Dramatic Conflict squarely on character #1.

### **THE QUESTION OF THE PLAY**

The Question of the Play is a clear articulation of the play's Dramatic Conflict. It is raised by the First Significant Repercussion.

## **THE FOUNDATION FUNNEL**

The Foundation Funnel is a section in which all of the characters attempt to resolve the central Dramatic Conflict and answer The Question of the Play.

## **THE CLIMAX**

The Climax is a singular event that sets into motion the resolution of the central Dramatic Conflict.

Let's go back and take a deeper look at each.

## **A DEEPER LOOK AT THE FOUNDATION FOCUS**

As soon as The First Significant Event is committed by character #1 upon character #2, we are in The Foundation Focus. It is the job of The Foundation Focus to deliver the consequences of having broken the routine and destroyed The Foundation. It does this by raising the dramatic stakes of The First Significant Event.

This is where the characters, and especially character #1, begin to get into trouble. They get into danger. The stable Foundation upon which the characters were safe and comfortable is gone forever, and they must learn to survive in a new and frightening place. They are forced to take risks as their protective layers are stripped away and their vulnerabilities are exposed and challenged.

The cast's ability to make improvisational offers that raise the Dramatic Stakes of a characters' situation is of great importance during The Foundation Focus. It is, in fact, the primary responsibility of The Foundation Focus to raise the dramatic stakes. Specifically, its responsibility is to raise the dramatic stakes of The First Significant Event.

So, why do I call it The Foundation Focus? I call it The Foundation Focus in order to emphasize its relationship to The Foundation. The Foundation Focus is born directly out of

material that was generated in *The Foundation*. It's as if material from *The Foundation* is being gathered up and refocused so that it shines anew with a stronger, more purposeful light.

Let's take a look at that Story Spine exercise that I presented earlier with Rex the Rude, and I'll use it to illustrate my point:

Once upon a time, there was an evil king named Rex the Rude.

Every day he crushed the peasants with injustice and tyranny.

But one day, Peter the Peasant spoke out and denounced the king.

Because of that, Rex the Rude had Peter the Peasant arrested.

Because of that, a spirit of rebellion swelled within the breast of the peasantry.

Because of that, the peasantry stormed the castle and captured Rex the Rude.

Until finally, Rex the Rude abdicated his throne in order to secure his release.

And ever since then, the people were ruled by Peter the Benevolent.

So, in *The Foundation* we learn about an evil king named Rex the Rude and the fact that he oppresses the peasants. With The First Significant Event, we learn that a certain peasant named Peter has taken a stand against the king. Now, let's say that the next two lines of the Story Spine comprise The Foundation Focus; Peter is arrested by the King, and the peasants are stirred into rebellion. Notice how all of the danger and discord is not only caused by The First Significant Event (there would have been no trouble had Peter not spoken out against the King) but is also born directly out of material that was established in *The*

Foundation. For example, the fact that Rex had Peter arrested in The Foundation Focus grew logically from a fact that we learned in The Foundation, that Rex was a wicked tyrant. And the fact that the peasants are stirred into rebellion in The Foundation Focus grows logically from the fact that they were cruelly and unjustly oppressed in The Foundation.

Again, it's as if The Foundation generates light that is captured, strengthened, and sharpened in The Foundation Focus. Finally, this newly intensified light is used to a specific purpose. It is used to shine a spotlight on The First Significant Event. That is, it is used to consistently raise the dramatic stakes of that single, fateful event and, in so doing, to constantly remind the world that it was that event that caused all the trouble.

Consider this alternative Story Spine as a contrast to the one just above:

Once upon a time, there was an evil king named Rex the Rude.

Every day he crushed the peasants with injustice and tyranny.

But one day, Peter the Peasant spoke out and denounced the King.

Because of that, Peter attracted the admiration of his neighbor's wife.

Because of that, they had an affair.

Notice how The Foundation Focus, in which Peter attracts the admiration of his neighbor's wife and they have an affair, while certainly a possible outcome of The First Significant Event, is simply not as dramatically satisfying as the first example.

Here's why. The "light" from The Foundation is not being captured, strengthened, and sharpened for use in The Foundation

Focus. That is, none of the information in The Foundation has proven to be important by returning with new force in The Foundation Focus. As a result, all of that potent information about the king has been wasted.

Also, the events of The Foundation Focus, namely, the affair between Peter and his neighbor's wife, do nothing to raise the stakes of The First Significant Event, Peter's denunciation of the king. If there is any light in The Foundation Focus, it is not being shone on The First Significant Event.

Another way to look at it is to think of the story itself as a fellow improviser. The Foundation of the play is the story's offer, and it is up to the other improvisers on stage to accept that offer and build upon it in The Foundation Focus.

## **A DEEPER LOOK AT THE FIRST SIGNIFICANT REPERCUSSION**

By committing The First Significant Event directly upon character #2, character #1 has set a dramatic chain of events into motion. Now, the laws of drama demand that people pay a price for their actions. It was character #1 who set the chain of events into motion, and so it must be character #1 who faces the ultimate consequence for having done so. That ultimate consequence is The First Significant Repercussion.

Because character #1 acts directly upon character #2 for The First Significant Event, character #2 returns the favor by acting directly upon character #1 for The First Significant Repercussion, ensuring once again that the fate of character #1 is inextricably linked to the fate of character #2.

This, then, is our formal definition of The First Significant Repercussion: a specific action that forces character #1 to face the ultimate consequence for having committed The First Significant Event. It is committed by character #2, on stage and in the present, directly upon character #1.

It is the point of The First Significant Repercussion to focus the play on character #1 by throwing the entire weight of the drama squarely and definitively upon character #1's shoulders. It says to the audience that this is character #1's play, and character #1's dilemma. It says this by raising what I call The Question of the Play.

### **A DEEPER LOOK AT THE QUESTION OF THE PLAY**

Smack in the middle of The Middle comes The Question of the Play. The Question of the Play is not necessarily articulated on stage by one of the characters, but rather it is an unspoken question regarding the fate of character #1 as it is connected to character #2.

The Question of the Play is brought into awareness as a direct result of The First Significant Repercussion, and it is a very specific question, which asks whether character #1 will succeed or fail in light of what character #2 just did.

Here are a few little story outlines to demonstrate how The Question of the Play is caused and formulated:

*Foundation:* Mary and Joe are two platonic friends who have always experienced a great deal of sexual tension. Mary, however, has been dating Roger for a number of years and is planning to marry him. Mary and Joe have never openly acknowledged their feelings for each other. As Mary's wedding day approaches, Joe finds himself falling deeper and deeper in love with her.

*First Significant Event:* Joe tells Mary that he loves her.

*Foundation Focus:* Mary is thrown into an emotional turmoil, torn between her love for Roger and her strong attraction to Joe. Joe implores her to give their relationship a chance before she marries Roger and it's too late. Mary decides that, unless she explores her feelings for Joe, she can never be sure that marrying Roger would be the right thing to do.

*First Significant Repercussion:* Mary has an affair with Joe.  
*The Question of the Play:* Will Joe end up with Mary?

Some things to notice about *The Question of the Play*:

- It is phrased as a yes-or-no question.
- Character #1 is the subject of *The Question*.
- Character #2 is the object of *The Question*.

Notice how *The Question of the Play* is brought into awareness as a direct result of *The First Significant Repercussion*. During *The Foundation Focus*, Mary is torn between her feelings for the two men, but it is *The First Significant Repercussion*—her affair with Joe—that brings her crisis to a head and crystallizes *The Question* for the audience.

Here's another example:

*Foundation:* Dr. Elizabeth Frankenberg is on the brink of discovering a cure for everything. However, her insistence upon unorthodox methodologies has cost her the support of the medical community, and her funding is about to evaporate. Although the elixir has not been perfected, she must test her miracle drug on a human subject before the plug is pulled on her project. She fills a syringe with her untested serum and pays a visit to the terminal ward of the local hospital. There she finds Betty, who is dying of everything.

*First Significant Event:* Elizabeth injects her serum into Betty.

*Foundation Focus:* Betty is cured, but the serum has an unexpected side effect. In order to rebuild the body, it draws on the energy contained in the soul. Betty is now in a state of physical perfection, but her soul has been completely erased. Without a soul, her life and health

are meaningless. Elizabeth, on the other hand, is ecstatic that her serum has worked. She is eager to bring her success to the attention of the public and to finally get the fame, glory, and respect she deserves. Betty tells Elizabeth about the loss of her soul, but Elizabeth is too focused on her imminent success to care. At last . . .

*First Significant Repercussion:* . . . Betty begs Elizabeth to forsake her glory, administer an antidote to the “cure,” and let her die.

*Question of the Play:* Will Elizabeth allow Betty to have the antidote?

Again, it is The First Significant Repercussion that creates The Question of the Play. Betty begs Elizabeth to give her the antidote, and so The Question becomes: Will Elizabeth give her the antidote?

The Question of the Play must adhere to a very specific formula:

Will character #1 either do something to or have something done to her by character #2?

The formula is important. It makes character #1 the subject of the sentence, reinforcing her position as the subject of the play. It makes character #2 the object of the sentence, ensuring that the fate of one will necessarily involve the fate of the other. And, finally, it allows the answer to The Question to be either yes or no, the importance of which will become apparent as we turn our attention to The Foundation Funnel.

## **A DEEPER LOOK AT THE FOUNDATION FUNNEL**

Everything leading up to The First Significant Repercussion is helping to raise The Question of the Play. Everything that follows The First Significant Repercussion is attempting to answer it.

The answer to The Question will always be either yes or no. Will Joe end up with Mary? He either will or he won't. Yes or no. Will Elizabeth give the antidote to Betty? She either will or she won't. Yes or no.

As soon as The Question is raised, the characters in the drama must decide how they want that question to be answered. Do they want it to be answered yes, or do they want it be answered no? In The Foundation Funnel, which begins immediately after The Question has been raised, the characters direct all of their energy toward answering The Question in the manner they desire. Those that want the answer to be yes will strive to make it so. Those that want the answer to be no will struggle to thwart those that oppose them.

Let's take a look at our example above. In our story about Mary and Joe, The Question of the Play is, "Will Joe end up with Mary?" It is now up to the characters to decide how they would like that question to be answered. Joe, perhaps, would like the answer to be yes, and Mary—riddled with guilt for having betrayed Roger—decides that the answer must be no. Joe would head off into The Foundation Funnel trying to change Mary's mind, and Mary would head off into The Foundation Funnel trying to find peace with her decision.

Now, let's assume that there are other characters involved in the drama. For example, Mary has a best friend in whom she confides her situation. This friend must now decide how she would like to see The Question answered. Perhaps, she doesn't like Joe and does not want to see Mary make such a terrible mistake. In that case, she would want the answer to The Question to be no, and she would work, throughout The Foundation Funnel, to achieve that end.

And what about Roger? Assuming the affair has been kept a secret, and he is unaware of Mary's ambivalence toward their

marriage, he might not even be aware that there is a question waiting to be answered. And yet, unless he is there to affect the outcome, he will not have a place in The Foundation Funnel. In fact, it is wonderful to have characters that are unaware of The Question because they have the fun of affecting the outcome through coincidence. For example, let's say that Mary has decided that she wants the answer to be no, Joe will not end up with her. However, Joe has been working hard to win her over, and after a while her resistance breaks down and she begins to lean toward yes. That night, Roger comes over to her house with flowers because it is the anniversary of their first date, something that Mary has completely forgotten about. Mary is reminded of how kind and thoughtful he is and remembers all of the reasons that she fell in love with him in the first place. Roger, in this case, has just nudged the answer a bit closer to no without even knowing that the contest was on.

Every action by every character in The Foundation Funnel must push the answer to The Question either closer to yes or closer to no. It is this struggle, between The Forces of Yes and The Forces of No, that creates the central Dramatic Conflict of the play. It is interesting and important to note that character #1 and character #2 need not be on opposite sides of the issue. Let's say that, after the affair, Mary realized that Joe is, in fact, the man of her dreams and that she must end up with him. In that case, Joe and Mary, character #1 and character #2, would both want the answer to The Question (Will Joe end up with Mary?) to be yes. The conflict, then, would come from the two of them, together, battling the characters who were intent on the answer being no. (A slightly more famous example of this would be William Shakespeare's *Romeo and Juliet*.)

It is also important to remember that a character need not remain faithful to her original choice. One can switch from yes to no and from no to yes as often as one likes. For example, Mary's

best friend may start off with a grudge against Joe and want the answer to be no. Joe, however, may be able to convince her that she is mistaken about him, and she can change her mind. Suddenly, she realizes what a great guy Joe is and how much better suited he is for Mary than Roger. In fact, the most dramatic and powerful scenes in The Foundation Funnel are often those in which one character attempts to convert another from yes to no or from no to yes.

Now, I'd like to explain why I call this section The Foundation Funnel. In order to do so, we need to look at it through the eyes of character #1. As I've tried to make clear, every single character in The Foundation Funnel, whether she knows it or not, is constantly affecting the answer to The Question. However, let's for a moment just take a look at character #1's trip through the Funnel. Let's assume that character #1 wants the answer to The Question to be yes. And let's also assume that by the time the answer is determined, character #1 did five things in order to achieve her goal.

Let's use our second story, above, about Dr. Elizabeth Frankenberg and Betty, for the example. The Question of the Play is, "Will Elizabeth give the antidote to Betty?" So, let's imagine that the rest of The Foundation Funnel plays out like this:

After Betty begs Elizabeth to administer an antidote to the "cure" and let her die, Elizabeth tells Betty that there is no antidote. However, Betty doesn't trust her. She breaks into Elizabeth's lab and discovers notes indicating that Elizabeth was lying and that there is in fact an antidote.

When she confronts Elizabeth with the notes, Elizabeth destroys the only vial of antidote that was made and burns the notes. But, the entire scene was observed by Elizabeth's laboratory assistant, who has a copy of the notes and whose conscience compels him to declare that he can help Betty, if Elizabeth won't.

Elizabeth orders him not to recreate the antidote, but he vows to help Betty and goes off to another laboratory to begin his work. Elizabeth, now becoming desperate, begs Betty not to take the antidote, but Betty is determined to do so.

Finally, Elizabeth goes to the lab in which her assistant is working and murders him before he completes the new batch of antidote. With the assistant gone, Betty's last chance at receiving the antidote is gone, and she is forced to continue her life as a soulless creature.

Now, by examining The Foundation Funnel, we see that Elizabeth, character #1, clearly wanted the answer to The Question to be no. In her efforts to make it no, she does five things:

1. She lies to Betty and tells her that there is no antidote.
2. When her lie is revealed, she destroys the antidote.
3. When it is discovered that her assistant knows how to make more of the antidote, she orders him not to.
4. When he begins to make more anyway, she begs Betty not to take the antidote.
5. When Betty says that she will take the antidote, Elizabeth kills her assistant before he can finish making it.

So, we can see, in retrospect, that at the beginning of The Foundation Funnel, Elizabeth has five options available to her:

1 2 3 4 5

However, after she tried option 1, lying to Betty, her lie was revealed, and it was not successful in determining the answer to The Question. She would now have only four options remaining:

2 3 4 5

However, after she tried option 2, destroying the antidote, her assistant's ability to make more became known, and option 2 was

not successful in determining the answer to The Question. She would now have only three options remaining:

3 4 5

However, after she tried option 3, ordering her assistant not to make any more of the antidote, he began to make more anyway, and option 3 was not successful in determining the answer to The Question. She would now have only two options remaining:

4 5

However, after she tried option 4, begging Betty not to take the antidote, Betty refused to listen to her, and option 4 was not successful in determining the answer to The Question. She would now have only one option remaining:

5

It is option 5 that is finally successful in determining the answer to The Question. Because she killed the assistant, the answer to The Question is no; Elizabeth will not allow Betty to have the antidote.

This progressive elimination of options that are available to character #1 as she is funneled toward her ultimate destiny is what inspires the name Foundation Funnel:

1 2 3 4 5

2 3 4 5

3 4 5

4 5

5

The final option, which in this case is option 5, is The Climax.

Please, please, please understand that I am not suggesting character #1 is supposed to plan in advance all of the options that she intends to pursue during The Foundation Funnel and then systematically proceed to pursue and eliminate them. That would be playwriting, and this is not playwriting. It's improvisation. The way to

make The Foundation Funnel happen on stage is for character #1 to decide how she would like The Question of the Play to be answered and to pursue her goal as vigorously as possible by spontaneously interacting with as many other characters in the play as necessary—just as one would do in life when intent upon achieving a goal. Only in retrospect will the cast be able to look back on The Foundation Funnel and count up the number of options employed by character #1. Also, although I use five options for my example, understand that the number five is arbitrary. In The Foundation Funnel, character #1 will employ as few or as many options as necessary in her attempt to achieve her goal.

### **A DEEPER LOOK AT THE CLIMAX**

The Climax is a critical moment in the play and must be the subject of a considerable amount of discussion. First, I need to define the term as I am using it here. The word “climax” is often used to describe a moment of emotional or dramatic intensity. That, however, is not the way in which I’m using it.

Here, The Climax is a specific action that, like The First Significant Event, is committed on stage and in the present. The Climax is the final action in The Foundation Funnel. It is the last available option to character #1 in her struggle to determine the outcome of her destiny:

1 2 3 4 5

2 3 4 5

3 4 5

4 5

5—The Climax

It might be a moment of emotional or dramatic intensity, but there is no reason it has to be, and it very often is not. In fact, as we’ll see a bit later, it is often its very subtlety and seemingly inconsequential nature that make it such a powerful dramatic event.

The purpose of The Climax is to set into motion a chain of events that will eventually answer The Question of the Play. The Climax is the beginning of The End.

Let's use an expanded version of our Story Spine exercise in order to examine The Climax and its function:

***Exercise #11: The Expanded Story Spine***

This version of the Story Spine adds the offer “And that’s when . . . ” to allow for The First Significant Repercussion, the offer “Which raised the question . . . ” to allow for the articulation of The Question of the Play, and a new “Because of that . . . ” section after The Climax in order to show how The Climax leads to the answer:

Once upon a time . . .  
Every day . . .  
But one day . . . (First Significant Event)  
Because of that . . .  
Because of that . . .  
Because of that . . .  
And, that’s when . . . (First Significant Repercussion)  
Which raised the question . . . (The Question of the Play)  
Because of that . . .  
Because of that . . .  
Because of that . . .  
Until finally . . . (The Climax)  
Because of that . . .  
Because of that . . .  
Because of that . . .  
And ever since then . . .

Here’s how the expanded Story Spine maps with our current version of the structural map and some helpful hints for improvising the exercise:

<b>CURRENT STRUCTURAL MAP</b>	<b>THE EXPANDED STORY SPINE</b>	<b>HELPFUL HINTS</b>
<b>Foundation</b>	Once upon a time . . . Every day . . .	Establish the Routine.
<b>First Significant Event</b>	But one day . . .	Character #1 to character #2.
<b>Foundation Focus</b>	Because of that . . . Because of that . . . Because of that . . .	Raise the dramatic stakes.
<b>First Significant Repercussion</b>	And that's when . . .	Character #2 to character #1.
<b>Question of the Play</b>	(Which raised the question . . . )	(Will #1 _____ #2?)
<b>Foundation Funnel</b>	Because of that . . . Because of that . . . Because of that . . .	The characters take actions that push the answer to The Question either closer to "Yes" or closer to "No."
<b>Climax</b>	Until, finally . . .	A chain of events is set in motion . . .
<b>The End</b>	Because of that . . . Because of that . . . Because of that . . . And ever since then . . .	. . . that eventually leads to the answer to The Question of the Play.

Feel free, by the way, to use as many "Because of that . . ." offers as you want. Here are some examples:

*Player 1: Once upon a time, there was a famous opera singer named Maria.*

*Player 2: Every day, she devoted her life to the world of the opera.*

*Player 3: But one day, she went to a punk-rock concert and met Spike, the lead singer of the Rabid Beasts.*

*Player 4: Because of that, she found herself attracted to his rebellious persona.*

*Player 5: Because of that, she started dating him.*

*Player 1: Because of that, she started hanging out at his band rehearsals.*

*Player 2: Because of that, Angelica Smart, her business manager, expressed her concern.*

*Player 3: Because of that, Maria told Angelica not to worry.*

*Player 4: Because of that, Angelica reminded Maria how much she had invested in her career and how much Maria owes her.*

*Player 5: And that's when Spike asked Maria to quit the opera and join the band.*

*Player 1: Which raised the question: Will Maria quit the opera and join Spike's band?*

*Player 2: Because of that, Maria was torn between the world of opera and the world of Spike.*

*Player 3: Because of that, Spike wrote a song for Maria called "Choose me!"*

*Player 4: Because of that, Maria was drawn even closer to Spike.*

*Player 5: Because of that, Maria knew that she would have to follow her heart.*

*Player 1: Because of that, Maria knew that she would have to face Angelica and tell her the news.*

*Player 2: Until finally, Maria told Angelica that she was leaving the opera to join the Rabid Beasts.*

*Player 3: Because of that, Angelica was furious.*

- Player 4: Because of that, Maria pleaded with her to understand.*
- Player 5: Because of that, Angelica told her she was crazy and asked her to please reconsider.*
- Player 1: Because of that, Maria told Angelica that her mind was made up.*
- Player 2: Because of that, Angelica asked whether she could, at least, arrange a farewell performance, for her, at the Metropolitan Opera House.*
- Player 3: Because of that, Maria agreed and performed to a sold-out crowd.*
- Player 4: Because of that, Maria rediscovered how much the opera meant to her.*
- Player 5: Because of that, she told Spike that she could never leave the opera.*
- Player 1: Because of that, Spike told her that his band was leaving on a three-year world tour and unless she came with them, they might never see each other again.*
- Player 2: Because of that, Maria bid Spike a sad and reluctant farewell.*
- Player 3: And ever since then, there was a touch of sadness in every song she sang.*

The answer to The Question is no. Maria will not quit the opera and join Spike's band. Notice The Climax, itself, does not answer The Question. After Maria tells Angelica the news, it is still possible for the answer to go either way. However, because Maria tells Angelica the news, the chain of events that eventually leads to the answer being no is set in motion. If Maria never told Angelica that she was leaving the opera, then Angelica would not have arranged the farewell performance and Maria would not have changed her mind.

Here's another example:

*Player 1: Once upon a time, there was a physicist named Iona Quark who worked in a laboratory with her trusted assistant, Newt.*

*Player 2: Every day, she came closer and closer to the brilliant discovery that would realize her life's work.*

*Player 3: But one day, Iona met another physicist, named Isa Topes at the big convention for physicists.*

*Player 4: Because of that, they began to talk about their work.*

*Player 5: Because of that, they discovered that they were each closing in on the same brilliant discovery!*

*Player 1: And that's when Isa told Iona to back off because nothing and nobody was going to prevent her from being the first to make the discovery.*

*Player 2: Which raised the question: Will Iona beat Isa to the discovery?*

*Player 3: Because of that, Iona did some research into Isa's past.*

*Player 4: Because of that, she discovered that Isa was once alleged to have stolen the research notes of a previous rival.*

*Player 5: Because of that, Iona was nervous to discover that Isa was often seen lurking about in the vicinity of her laboratory.*

*Player 1: Because of that, she told the guard at the front door to make sure that nobody gets in without the proper identification.*

- Player 2: Because of that, she was even more disturbed to learn that Isa had received a visitor's ID card granting her access to use the research library, which was just next door to Iona's office.*
- Player 3: Because of that, she told the director of the laboratory that she suspected Isa was trying to steal her notes.*
- Player 4: Because of that, the director of the laboratory told her that scientists in his America were innocent until proven guilty, and as Isa had never been proven guilty of anything, he suggested that, if Iona wanted her funding to be continued, she had better just focus on her work and leave Isa alone.*
- Player 5: Because of that, Iona was at her wits' end when she discovered Isa hovering ominously about the door of her office.*
- Player 1: Because of that, Iona could not put her mind at ease.*
- Player 2: Until finally, she took all of her research journals and gave them to her assistant, Newt, with instructions to put them into a safety deposit box at the bank where they were sure to be safe.*
- Player 3: Because of that, Newt left to go the bank with the journals.*
- Player 4: Because of that, he met Isa on the corner.*
- Player 5: Because of that, they kissed and celebrated the success of their wicked plan.*
- Player 1: Because of that, they were both terribly excited as Isa took the journals and Newt returned to the lab.*

*Player 2: Because of that, Isa now had all of the information she needed to complete the final experiment and make the brilliant discovery.*

*Player 3: Because of that, she published the results and became famous.*

*Player 4: Because of that, she and Newt set up their own scientific research facility to carry on with the work.*

*Player 5: Because of that, Iona was left with nothing.*

*Player 1: And ever since then, Iona lived a sad and bitter life.*

The answer to The Question is no. Iona will not beat Isa to the discovery. Notice, again, how The Climax doesn't actually answer The Question but sets in motion the chain of events that eventually leads to the answer. In fact, in Iona's case, The Climax proves to be an example of dramatic irony. When Iona gives her journals to Newt, she thinks she is bettering her odds of beating Isa to the discovery and answering The Question yes. In fact, she achieves just the opposite as it is that very act that secures the answer of no.

I said earlier that far from having to be the most exciting moment in the show, The Climax is often a very subtle moment that calls little or no attention to itself at all. Let's look at an example in which that's the case:

*Player 1: Once upon a time, there was a struggling private investigator named Sol Magee.*

*Player 2: Every day, he waited in vain for a client to walk through his door.*

*Player 3: But one day, Sol heard a knock and he opened his door to Molly Malloy.*

*Player 4: Because of that, she walked into his office and told him that she needed his help.*

- Player 5: Because of that, he asked her to explain herself.*
- Player 1: Because of that, she told him that her rich husband, Jackson Malloy, was missing and that he had a powerful enemy named Murderous Mike, and so he was probably dead, and that she had a checkered past. And so the cops would probably try to pin the murder on her. But she was innocent, and Sol had to believe her, and he had to help her prove it by catching the real killer.*
- Player 2: Because of that, Sol didn't know whether she was guilty or innocent.*
- Player 3: And that's when Molly broke down into tears, swore she was innocent, and begged Sol to please help her prove it.*
- Player 4: Which raised the question: Will Sol prove Molly to be innocent?*
- Player 5: Because of that, Sol said he'd take the case.*
- Player 1: Because of that, Sol began his investigation.*
- Player 2: Because of that, he was lead through a maze of mysterious clues, red herrings, dangerous encounters, cheap booze, close calls, and dead ends—all to no avail.*
- Player 3: Because of that, he did it all again and again—to no avail.*
- Player 4: Until finally, tired and drunk, he stumbled into a cheap motel and rented a room from Ernie the clerk, determined to wake up early—and do it all again.*
- Player 5: Because of that, Ernie gave him the key to room 117.*

*Player 1: Because of that, he was annoyed by the loud voices in room 118 that wouldn't let him get any rest.*

*Player 2: Because of that, he walked over to the wall with the intention of banging on it.*

*Player 3: Because of that, he heard the voices more clearly and recognized one of them as the voice of Molly Malloy.*

*Player 4: Because of that, he put a glass to the wall and listened to what they were saying.*

*Player 5: Because of that, he heard Molly say that there was nothing to worry about because she had that ridiculous little detective wrapped around her little finger, and as soon as she planted the evidence on Murderous Mike and told Magee that he threatened her, Magee would pay a visit to Murderous Mike, find the evidence, and she'd be in the clear.*

*Player 1: Because of that, Sol called the cops and told them where they could pick up the killer of Jackson Malloy.*

*Player 2: And ever since then, Sol stayed away from cheap booze and crying dames.*

So, the answer to The Question is no. Sol will not prove Molly to be innocent. Notice how none of Sol's dogged detective work, which we can only imagine to be filled with "exciting" moments, had anything to do with the final outcome. And, even if we're generous enough to assume that the scene in which Sol listens through the glass and discovers Molly's betrayal is a scene of such emotional impact that the Tony nomination is all sewn up, it is still not The Climax. Instead, the seemingly insignificant

decision to check into a motel room for a couple of hours of sleep, before continuing his investigation, is what leads to the unraveling of Molly's scheme, the answer to The Question, and the final destiny of the characters.

However, setting the fateful chain of events in motion is not enough for an action to fulfill the role of a satisfying dramatic climax. There are two more criteria. The first is that, like The First Significant Event, The Climax must be committed by character #1. Notice that this is true for all of our examples above: it is Maria who tells Angelica that she is leaving the opera, it is Iona who gives Newt her research journals, and it is Sol who rents the hotel room from Ernie.

This is essential, and here's why. If it is character #1 who begins all the trouble with The First Significant Event, and if, as a result, it is character #1 whose fate is called into question by The First Significant Repercussion, then it must be character #1 who takes the final responsibility for answering that question and determining the outcome. Remember, the laws of drama hold characters responsible for their actions and accountable for their destinies. If you're the one who breaks it, then you're the one who fixes it; and if you can't fix it then you have to die trying. And character #1 is the character who breaks it.

It is Maria, in our first example above, who made the decision to stray from her normal world of the opera and experience the world of punk rock. As a result, it is Maria who must wrestle with the difficult choice between the two worlds. And, in order for the drama to satisfy, it must be Maria who is accountable for her decision and responsible for the outcome.

To test this a bit, let's pick up that example from The First Significant Repercussion and see how the story would feel if we were to put The Climax into the hands of somebody else:

*Player 5: And that's when Spike asked Maria to quit the opera and join the band.*

- Player 1: Which raised the question: Will Maria quit the opera and join Spike's band?*
- Player 2: Because of that, Maria was torn between the world of opera and the world of Spike.*
- Player 3: Because of that, Spike wrote a song for Maria called "Choose me!"*
- Player 4: Because of that, Maria was drawn even closer to Spike.*
- Player 5: Until finally, the drummer in Spike's band told Spike that he didn't think Maria was a good fit for the band.*
- Player 1: Because of that, Spike said that he was the leader and what he said went.*
- Player 2: Because of that, the drummer threatened to quit if Maria became a member.*
- Player 3: Because of that, Spike backed down and told Maria that she couldn't join the band.*
- Player 4: Because of that, their relationship suffered and they broke up.*
- Player 5: And ever since then, Maria stayed in the world of the opera.*

Notice how, in this version of the story, Maria causes the problem with The First Significant Event, and Maria faces the consequences because of The First Significant Repercussion, but the drummer is the one who commits The Climax and becomes responsible for the eventual answer to The Question. By taking The Climax, the drummer has stolen Maria's opportunity to answer her own question. As a result, Maria is not responsible for the outcome of her own destiny, and the audience is left feeling empty and cheated.

Now, take another look at the original Climaxes in each of our three examples:

Until finally, Maria told Angelica that she was leaving the opera to join the Rabid Beasts.

Until finally, Iona took all of her research journals and gave them to her assistant, Newt, with instructions to put them into a safety deposit box at the bank where they were sure to be safe.

Until finally, tired and drunk, he stumbled into a cheap motel and rented a room from Ernie the clerk, determined to wake up early—and do it all again.

In each case, The Climax is not only committed by character #1 but also, like The First Significant Event, it is committed on stage, in the present, and directly upon another character.

However, unlike The First Significant Event, it is not committed upon character #2. Maria acts not upon Spike but upon Angelica. Iona acts not upon Isa but upon Newt. Sol acts not upon Molly but upon Ernie. In fact, The Climax can be committed upon anybody else in the entire play except character #2.

Let's examine why. Here is just The First Significant Event, First Significant Repercussion, and resulting question from our story about Maria and Spike:

*FSE: But one day, she went to a punk-rock concert and met Spike, the lead singer of the Rabid Beasts.*

*FSR: And that's when Spike asked Maria to quit the opera and join the band.*

*Q: Which raised the question: Will Maria quit the opera and join Spike's band?*

We know that, as the play moves from this point on, we go right into The Foundation Funnel during which each of the characters

will fall into one of two groups, those whose actions move the answer closer to yes, and those whose actions move the answer closer to no—The Forces of Yes and The Forces of No.

In this case, both character #1 and character #2 align themselves with The Forces of Yes; they both take actions that move the answer to The Question closer to yes. Spike writes a song for Maria called “Choose me!” Maria allows herself to be drawn closer and closer to Spike, and Maria prepares herself for her uncomfortable conversation with her business manager, Angelica Smart.

However, The Forces of No are still in play. In this case, The Forces of No are represented by Angelica. Maria cannot quit the opera without telling Angelica. And so, even though Maria has decided to quit and join Spike’s band and even though Spike is eager for that to happen, they simply cannot make it happen between the two of them. Character #1 and character #2 have reached a dramatic stalemate. They have both done everything they could possibly do to each other in order to achieve the answer they desire, and they have reached an impasse.

This impasse or dramatic stalemate that develops between character #1 and character #2, as they each pursue their desired answer to The Question, is what demands the involvement of a third character in The Climax. After all, if either of them could achieve their desired answer without having to go outside of the character #1–character #2 relationship, they would! If Maria could simply walk away from the opera, guilt free and with no regrets, to join Spike’s band, she’d be happy to do it. But, she can’t. She first must deal with her mixed feelings and with her obligations to Angelica. Otherwise, the solution to her problem would be too easy, and the entire ending of the play would lack dramatic interest.

It is perhaps a bit easier to appreciate the dramatic stalemate when character #1 and character #2 are on opposite sides of the yes-or-no issue. Let’s take a look at our next example:

*FSE: But one day, Iona met another physicist, named Isa Topes, at the big convention for physicists.*

*FSR: And that's when Isa told Iona to back off because nothing and nobody was going to prevent her from being the first to make the discovery.*

*Q: Which raised the question: Will Iona beat Isa to the discovery?*

In this case, Iona, character #1, wants to make the answer to The Question yes and Isa, character #2, wants to make the answer to The Question no. In The Foundation Funnel, they both take actions in an attempt to achieve their desired opposing outcomes:

Iona did some research into Isa's past and discovered that Isa was once alleged to have stolen the research notes of a previous rival.

(Moving the answer toward yes, because it makes her aware of Isa's criminal nature and allows her to protect herself against it.)

Isa begins lurking about the vicinity of Iona's laboratory.

(Moving the answer toward no as she apparently prepares to steal Iona's notes.)

Iona discovers this and tells the security guard to make sure that nobody gets in without the proper identification.

(Moving the answer toward yes as she further protects her notes.)

Isa gets the proper identification in order to get past the security guard.

(Moving the answer toward no.)

Iona tells the director that she suspected Isa of trying to steal her notes.

(Trying to move the answer toward yes as she expects protection from the director.)

The director threatens to cut off her funding if she doesn't just focus on her work and leave Isa alone.

(Moving the answer toward no.)

Isa hovers ominously about the door to Iona's office.

(Moving the answer toward no.)

Iona discovers her, and her first apparent attempt to steal the notes is thwarted.

(Moving the answer toward yes.)

And here we have the dramatic stalemate. Iona has done all she could to protect her notes from Isa, and Isa has done all she could to steal them. They are at an impasse. They are equally matched. There is nothing else that they can do to each other in order to move the answer even one drop closer to their desired outcome. An additional influence is required to break the stalemate and give the victory to one or the other.

In order to resolve this conflict, without involving the influence of another character, either character #1 or character #2 would simply have to give up the fight. And that, of course, would be thoroughly dissatisfying for the audience.

Therefore, as soon as the dramatic stalemate is in position, it is time for character #1 to commit The Climax, and it must be committed upon—not character #2—but character #3.

This, then, is our formal definition of The Climax: an action that is committed by character #1, on stage and in the present, directly upon character #3. It sets into motion the chain of events that eventually answers The Question of the Play.

Any character in the play, with the exception of character #2, is an eligible character #3.

We have now completed our analysis of The Middle, composed of The Foundation Focus, The First Significant Repercussion, The Question of the Play, The Foundation Funnel, and The Climax. I can now go back and present, once again, the third evolution of our structural map, this time, with the core functions improved upon and completed.

## STRUCTURAL MAP, THIRD EVOLUTION

## CORE FUNCTION

<b>Beginning</b>	Foundation	The central characters' normal routine, in the world of the play, is established.
	First Significant Event	Character #1 breaks the routine by committing a specific action, on stage and in the present, directly upon character #2. The Foundation crumbles.
<b>Middle</b>	Foundation Focus	Robbed of their familiar Foundation, the characters struggle to survive as they encounter ever-increasing risk in their new and unknown world. Material from The Foundation is reincorporated and refocused in such a way as to continuously raise the dramatic stakes of The First Significant Event.
	First Significant Repercussion	Character #2 commits a specific action, on stage and in the present, directly upon character #1. The First Significant Repercussion is the logical conclusion of the Cause and Effect chain of events that comprise The Foundation Focus. It throws the entire weight of the dilemma squarely upon the shoulders of character #1 and it raises The Question of the Play.

Question of the Play	The question regarding the fate of character #1 and character #2 that is brought into awareness by The First Significant Repercussion. It crystallizes the central dilemma that the rest of the play must endeavor to resolve. It is phrased according to the following specific formula: Will character #1 either do something to or have something done to her by character #2? It can always be answered either yes or no.
Foundation Funnel	The characters act upon their environment and upon each other in order to answer The Question of the Play according to their desires.
Climax	Character #1 commits a specific action, on stage and in the present, directly upon any character other than character #2. This action sets the answer to The Question of the Play irrevocably in motion. The character that was acted upon becomes character #3.
<b>End</b>	End The characters either succeed or fail, a new Foundation is built, and a new routine is established.

## The End

Everything that happens after The Climax is a part of The End, and I refer to this section as The Foundation Finale. It is in The Foundation Finale that The Climax bears its fruit, the fates of the characters are played out, and The Question of the Play is finally answered.

## **A DEEPER LOOK AT THE FOUNDATION FINALE**

The potency of The Foundation Finale lies in the fact that some of the characters may be unaware that they have entered it until it's too late for them to do anything about it. That's because, as we have seen before, it is often impossible for the characters to know that The Climax has been committed until The Question of the Play is finally answered. The characters, then, go through The Foundation Finale as if they were still in The Foundation Funnel, fervently striving to answer The Question according to their individual desires, blissfully or pathetically unaware that The Climax has already taken place, that the outcome has already been determined, and that they are now acting in vain.

This is the case in our story of Sol Magee and Molly Molloy:

Until finally, tired and drunk, he stumbled into a cheap motel and rented a room from Ernie the clerk, determined to wake up early—and do it all again.

Because of that, Ernie gave him the key to room 117.

Because of that, he was annoyed by the loud voices in room 118 that wouldn't let him get any rest.

Because of that, he walked over to the wall with the intention of banging on it.

Because of that, he heard the voices more clearly and recognized one of them as the voice of Molly Malloy.

Because of that, he put a glass to the wall and listened to what they were saying.

Because of that, he heard Molly say that there was nothing to worry about because she had that ridiculous little detective wrapped around her little finger and that as soon as she planted the evidence on Murderous Mike and told Magee that he threatened her, Magee

would pay a visit to Murderous Mike, find the evidence, and be in the clear.

Because of that, Sol called the cops and told them where they could pick up the killer of Jackson Malloy. And ever since then, Sol stayed away from cheap booze and crying dames.

As soon as Sol rents room 117 from Ernie, we are in *The Foundation Finale*. *The Climax* has been committed, and it is now just a matter of time before the chain of events, that will convict Molly and bruise Sol's heart, plays itself out. Molly doesn't know this, though, and she will spend the entire *Foundation Finale* planning her rosy future with the strange man in room 118. She won't discover that she's in *The Foundation Finale* until the cops come banging on her door. Even Sol, who committed *The Climax*, believes that he's still in *The Foundation Funnel*—that is, he believes that he still might be able to prove Molly innocent—up until the time that he puts that glass against the wall. Only then does he realize that the gig is up, and only then, should he choose to, can he trace his destiny back to *The Climax*.

Once *The Question of the Play* has been answered, the characters are faced with the task of establishing a new *Foundation*. That is, how will life continue in light of everything that just happened to them? As the characters break ground upon the construction of their new *Foundation*, our play may end.

We can now take a look at our final evolution of the structural map and the core functions on pages 72–73.

### ***Exercise #12: The Five-Minute Play***

It's time to get it all up on its feet by improvising a complete play in five minutes. The *First Significant Event* should happen at about one and a half to two minutes in, and *The First Significant*

Repercussion should happen at about three and a half to four minutes in.

Have fun!

### **TIPS FOR SUCCESS:**

*When first getting started with this, it's important for at least one player to sit out and observe. That player should look for the dramatic landmarks of the structural map as the play unfolds and take notes. The players on stage should focus mostly on spontaneity and exceptional improvisation and not so much on the structural map. After the five-minute play, the note taker should analyze the structure of the play for the cast. Following this analysis, a group conversation should raise and answer the following questions:*

- Did the play hit each of the dramatic landmarks?
- Do the players on stage have an analysis of the play that differs from the note taker's?
- Who was character #1, character #2, and character #3?
- Were the players on stage consciously making choices to fulfill certain dramatic landmarks or were they acting completely instinctually?

Be sure to rotate the position of note taker, as that position is as essential to the learning process as being in the play. Even if the show has a director, it is a good idea for the players to rotate out and take notes.

Remember, this is going to be hard! The first number of tries is likely to be confusing and frustrating. Let that be the case. Accept that this is a new and difficult skill that will take some time to master.

## STRUCTURAL MAP, THIRD EVOLUTION

## CORE FUNCTION

<b>Beginning</b>	Foundation	The central characters' normal routine, in the world of the play, is established.
	First Significant Event	Character #1 breaks the routine by committing a specific action, on stage and in the present, directly upon character #2. The Foundation crumbles.
<b>Middle</b>	Foundation Focus	Robbed of their familiar Foundation, the characters struggle to survive as they encounter ever-increasing risk in their new and unknown world. Material from The Foundation is reincorporated and refocused in such a way as to continuously raise the dramatic stakes of The First Significant Event.
	First Significant Repercussion	Character #2 commits a specific action, on stage and in the present, directly upon character #1. The First Significant Repercussion is the logical conclusion of the Cause and Effect chain of events that comprise The Foundation Focus. It throws the entire weight of the dilemma squarely upon the shoulders of character #1 and it raises The Question of the Play.
	Question of the Play	The question regarding the fate of character #1 and character #2 that is brought into awareness by The First Significant Repercussion. It crystallizes the central dilemma that the rest of the play must endeavor to resolve. It is phrased according to the following specific formula: Will character #1 either do something to or have something done

to her by character #2? It can always be answered either yes or no.

**Foundation Funnel**

The characters quickly fall into two main groups, those that want the answer to The Question of the Play to be “yes” and those that want the answer to The Question of the Play to be “no.” They all take actions in an effort to achieve their desired answer.

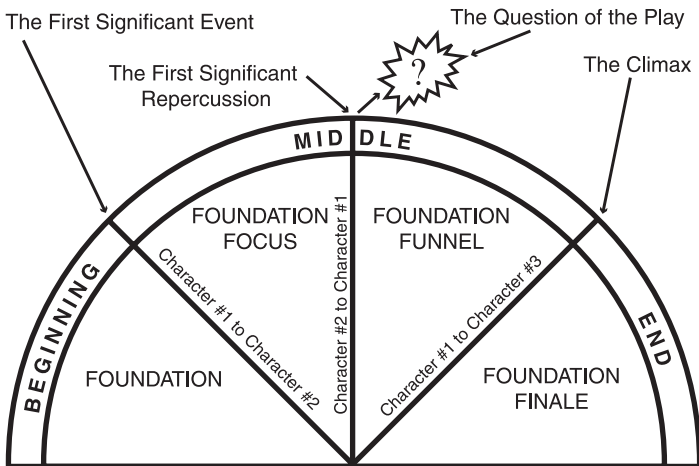
**Climax**

This is the final action of The Foundation Funnel. It is committed by character #1, on stage and in the present, directly upon character #3. It sets into motion the chain of events that eventually answer The Question of the Play.

**End**

**Foundation Finale**

The chain of events initiated by The Climax plays itself out, The Question of the Play is answered, and the characters begin to build a new Foundation on which to live their lives.



The Play by Play Structural Map



# The Structure of a Substantial Scene

**Plays are constructed of scenes** in the way that buildings are constructed of bricks. Now that we have an understanding of how the building is designed, let's take a look at how to make the bricks.

Scenes, too, have a beginning, a middle, and an end. However, their construction is significantly different from that of a play. This is because the demands of a play are different than the demands of a scene. A play must present a complete story. Its beginning must cause its middle, and its middle must cause its end. When it's over, The Question of the Play has been answered, and no one in the audience should be wondering what happens next.

A scene, however, is just the opposite. While it has a beginning, a middle, and an end, the end of the scene is not the end of the play. (Except for the last scene of the play, of course.) And, at the end of a scene, the audience should very much be wondering what happens next. In fact, they should be bursting with anticipation.

Since a scene does not have the same type of narrative obligation as the play, it does not require strict adherence to the rules of The First Significant Event, First Significant Repercussion, and Climax. It does, however, have its own set of obligations, and it does, very much, require its own version of a beginning, a middle,

and an end. In this section, we'll take a look at how a scene, as opposed to a play, is structured.

Now, in plays there are all types of moments that can be called a scene. The dozen or so lines of dialogue exchanged by two minor characters as they are awaiting the arrival of character #1, the five or six lines of dialogue used to transition from one important scene to another, etc. Those are not the types of scenes I'm addressing. The types of scenes I'm talking about are the Substantial Scenes, the scenes that take a considerable amount of time and significantly impact the direction of the plot.

## **The Platform**

Scenes, then, begin with a Platform. The Platform of a scene serves much the same purpose as The Foundation of a play. I'm choosing a different term, however, for two reasons, first, to avoid confusion and, second, to make the point that a Platform for a scene need not be as strong as The Foundation of a play as it is not required to bear as much weight. The Platform accomplishes three things:

- It effects the transition from the previous scene into the present one.
- It provides whatever expository material is required.
- It introduces the Main Forces of the scene.

## **MAIN FORCES**

By "Main Forces," I refer to anything that exerts a force toward the achievement of a certain objective. An objective is a desired result. More often than not, the Main Forces are the characters in the scene. However, that needn't always be the case. For example, if the scene is about two prisoners trying to escape from their cell, then the two prisoners would be two of the Forces at play, each with the objective of escaping from the cell, and the cell, itself, would be another Force at play, with the objective of keeping the

prisoners in jail. The environment, in which the scene takes place, becomes one of the Main Forces.

In addition to the environment, other noncharacter Forces can be:

- **Objects.** Suzie's objective is to open the bottle of ketchup, and the bottle of ketchup's objective is to remain closed.
- **Preexisting conditions.** Tammy and Mordecai share the objective of getting married, but Mordecai's strict religious upbringing makes his parents' permission impossible to obtain. The preexisting condition of their different religions and of his parents' insistence that he marry within the faith is the Force that brings the opposing objective to the scene.
- **Inner influences.** Gene's objective is to call Lois on the telephone and ask her for a date. His nervousness, however, will not allow him to do so. The objective, if you will, of his nervousness is to prevent him from making the call.
- **Fate.** Sarah's objective is to get to the temple in time for her wedding, but—as fate would have it—a sudden snowstorm closes the only bridge to the island.

Scenes such as these, in which we witness the struggle of person against environment, person against object, person against preexisting condition, person against inner influences, and person against fate, are very compelling to an audience and very worthy of exploration by the improviser.

During The Platform, then, at least one of the Main Forces begins to pursue an objective.

## **Engagement**

The Platform ends at The Moment of Engagement. Engagement occurs when the objective of one Main Force has a direct and significant impact on another Main Force. Imagine a Platform in which

Camille's objective is to go to sleep after a hard day at work, and her roommate Dana's objective is to do some jazzercise in the living room:

*Camille: (Entering the apartment.) Wow, what a day!  
I'm just beat.*

*Dana: Hey, Camille! Where's the jazzercise DVD?*

*Camille: What? Oh. It's over there.*

*Dana: Oh, thanks. Do you want to work out?*

*Camille: No, I'm exhausted. I think I'm going to crash.*

*Dana: Okay! Later, Gator!*

(Dana puts the DVD into the DVD player, as Camille goes into the bedroom. Suddenly, the music starts blasting and Dana starts jumping up and down.

Camille comes out of the bedroom.)

*Camille: Dana. Dana! DANA!!!*

*Dana: What?*

*Camille: I am trying to sleep. Can you please do that later?*

Up until Camille's last line, we were in The Platform. Both of the Main Forces, Camille and Dana, had clear objectives. However, they were coexisting well enough. Each Force was able to pursue her objective without having any type of impact on the other.

But, when Camille said, "Can you please do that later?" the Forces engaged. Camille impacted Dana by obstructing the pursuit of Dana's objective. The Moment of Engagement, similar to The First Significant Event, concludes the beginning of a Substantial Scene and ushers us into the middle.

## **Dramatic Alignment or Dramatic Conflict**

After The Moment of Engagement, one of two things will be true. The Forces will either have objectives that align or objectives that conflict.

If their objectives align, they will have either the same objective or complementary objectives. An example of two Forces having the same objective would be my example from before in which the two prisoners both wanted to escape from the cell. An example of two Forces having complementary objectives would be if one of the prisoners did not want to escape but did want to help his friend escape. They would both be working toward the same thing, but one's objective would be phrased, "I want to escape," while the other's objective would be phrased, "I want to help my friend escape."

If their objectives conflict, they will have opposing objectives and one will not be able to succeed unless the other one fails.

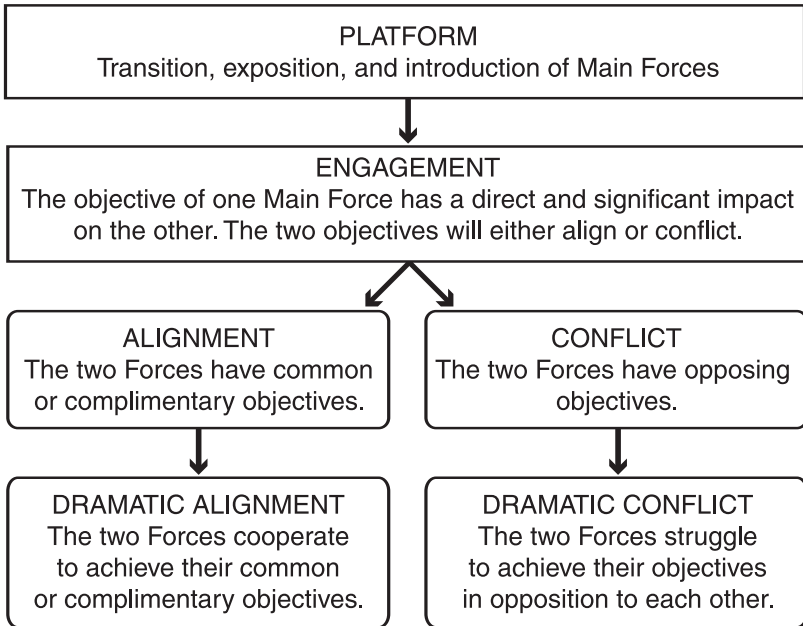
In our example above, if Dana were to tell Camille that she couldn't do her jazzercise later because her personal trainer told her how important it was that she stuck to a rigid routine and she would never—not ever—do anything to betray the trust of her personal trainer, then their objectives would conflict and we would be setting the stage for a scene of Dramatic Conflict.

If, on the other hand, Dana were to realize how insensitive she was being after Camille was out working all day long, how sorry she was that she wasn't more considerate, how much she appreciates Camille letting her live in the apartment without paying rent until she gets back on her feet following her emotional breakup with Brad, and offer to not only turn off the DVD but also to do everything in her power to make sure that nothing and nobody disturb Camille for the rest of the evening so that she could get some well-deserved sleep, why, then we'd be setting the stage for a scene of Dramatic Alignment in which both Forces would have complementary objectives involving getting Camille to bed.

In a scene of Dramatic Alignment, the Forces cooperate in order to achieve their common or complementary objectives. In a scene of Dramatic Conflict, the Forces work in opposition to each other in order to achieve their own objective at the expense of the other.

Here is the beginning of a flowchart to help visualize the divergent directions in which a scene can unfold:

## PLATFORM TO DRAMATIC ALIGNMENT/CONFLICT



### From Dramatic Conflict to Resolution

In a scene of Dramatic Conflict, the Forces employ tactics in order to achieve their objective in the face of the opposing Force. For example, if Dana refused to stop doing her jazzercise and the scene between Dana and Camille became one of Dramatic Conflict, then Dana might employ the following tactics in order to achieve her objective:

- She might explain the importance of maintaining her rigid jazzercise routine, for fear of upsetting her personal trainer.
- She might try to persuade Camille to jazzercise with her.

- She might seek a compromise by offering to turn the volume down lower.
- She might complain that Camille sets all the rules and that isn't fair.
- She might play on Camille's sympathy by reminding her that she recently broke up with Brad, that she's still an emotional wreck, and that jazzercise is the only thing that helps her feel good about herself.

Camille, of course, would counter Dana's tactics with tactics of her own:

- She might discount Dana's argument that she needs to stick to a rigid jazzercise routine because Dana always says things like that and she never ends up sticking to anything.
- She might reiterate how tired she is and how she can't possibly do any jazzercise right now.
- She might reject Dana's compromise because even if the volume is turned down, all of Dana's jumping around would still keep her awake.
- She might defend her right to set all the rules because it's her apartment and Dana has been living there for six months, now, without paying rent.
- She might threaten to kick Dana out if she doesn't stop jazzercise and let her get some sleep.

There are two important things to notice about the interchange of tactics in the example above, as they apply to improvisation.

First, the tactics not only serve to create the Dramatic Conflict of the scene by successfully pitting the two opposing Forces against one another but they also help to further develop the characters themselves. Perhaps the improviser portraying Dana had not yet discovered that Dana frequently tries to manipulate people by playing on their sympathy. Once that is employed

as a tactic, however, it is revealed to the audience as a character trait, and the character of Dana is suddenly drawn more clearly.

Second, there is an important difference between two Forces employing tactics in order to achieve an objective in the face of their opposition and two improvisers arguing on stage, or blocking each other's offers, or making each other "wrong." The difference is sometimes difficult to tell when you're the improviser on stage, but—I promise you—it is never difficult to tell when you're in the audience. Substantial Scene work such as this is a sophisticated thing, and it involves an advanced understanding of the principles of improvisation.

In order to explore this a bit, let's take another look at the three basic principles of improvisation that I mentioned earlier:

***Be spontaneous!***

Trust your first idea and act on it.

***Always make your partner look good.***

Focus on your partner, discover what she needs to be successful, and provide it.

***Always say, "Yes!"***

Gladly embrace your partner's idea and build upon it.

One could argue that if we are always supposed to say, "Yes!" to our partner's idea, that as soon as Camille asked Dana to stop jazzerciseing, Dana should have "accepted the offer" and complied.

However, that isn't the case, because "Always say, 'Yes!'" does not exist in a vacuum. It exists in collaboration with "Always make your partner look good." In order to do that, you must "focus on your partner, discover what she needs to be successful, and provide it." So, what is the improviser playing Camille attempting to succeed at? At getting Dana to be quiet so she can go back stage and take a nap? Of course not. She is trying to succeed in creating an exceptional scene with an interesting Dramatic Conflict. In order

to help her succeed, her partner playing Dana can do nothing better than to provide the opposing Force that is required for the conflict to unfold. By Dana saying “no” to Camille’s request that she stop making noise, the improviser is, in fact, saying “Yes!” to her partner’s offer that they develop a Dramatic Conflict. Of course, there can often be a fine line between this type of sophisticated understanding and acceptance of an implied offer and plain old blocking, arguing, or making the other improviser wrong. Nothing but practice and patience will help a troupe of improvisers master the difference, embrace the former, and avoid the latter.

For an illustration of the difference, here are two versions of the scene between Dana and Camille. The first will be an example of two opposing Forces resulting in Dramatic Conflict, and the second will be an example of two improvisers arguing, blocking, and making each other wrong.

### **SCENE #1**

*Camille: (Entering the apartment.) Wow, what a day!  
I’m just beat.*

*Dana: Hey, Camille! Where’s the jazzercise DVD?*

*Camille: What? Oh. It’s over there.*

*Dana: Oh, thanks. Do you want to work out?*

*Camille: No, I’m exhausted. I think I’m going to crash.*

*Dana: Okay. Later, gator!*

(Dana puts the DVD into the DVD player, as Camille goes into the bedroom. Suddenly, the music starts blasting and Dana starts jumping up and down. Camille comes out of the bedroom.)

*Camille: Dana. Dana! DANA!!!*

*Dana: What?*

*Camille: I am trying to sleep. Can you please do that later?*

*Dana: Camille, it’s 6:30.*

*Camille: So?*

*Dana: So, Derek, my new personal trainer, has me on a very rigid jazzercise routine. I have to jazzercise at exactly 6:30 every day.*

*Camille: Dana, this is the fourth new personal trainer that you've had in six weeks. And, the fourth new jazzercise routine. Can you, please, just start this one tomorrow?*

*Dana: Just do twenty minutes with me.*

*Camille: No, I'm exhausted.*

*Dana: Fine, I'll turn down the volume.*

*Camille: Dana, you're still going to be jumping all over the place.*

*Dana: Well, how come you get to set all the rules, Camille? I live here, too, you know.*

*Camille: Because it's my apartment, Dana. Oh, and also because you haven't paid any rent in the past six months. Oh, and also because you said you'd only be staying for a couple of weeks while you looked for work. Oh, and because you haven't been looking for work because all you've been doing is going to the gym every day and coming on to all of the trainers!*

*Dana: (Holding back the tears.) That hurt me, Camille. That really hurt. Especially coming from you, my best friend. You know that I am still very tender from my breakup with Brad. And, I am looking for work. Every day. At the gym. But, they keep saying "no," no matter how much I ask. And, I've just been experiencing a lot of rejection lately, from Brad, from the gym. And the only thing I have, right now, to make me feel*

*good about myself, is my jazzercise. Please, Camille, just let me do my jazzercise. Please.*

*Camille: Dana, either turn that thing off or pack your stuff and leave.*

## **SCENE #2**

*Camille: (Entering the apartment.) Wow, what a day! I'm just beat.*

*Dana: Camille, you're late. I hate it when you're late, Camille. I just hate it.*

*Camille: Hey, back off. I had a hard day at work.*

*Dana: I don't care, I've been looking for my jazzercise DVD and I can't find it. Do you know where it is?*

*Camille: What am I, the maid?*

*Dana: Yes, you are the maid. Now, where's my jazzercise DVD?*

*Camille: Look, I'm not the maid and I'm going to sleep.*

*Dana: Good, at least I won't have to listen to you talk.*

(Dana puts the DVD into the DVD player, as Camille goes into the bedroom. Suddenly, the music starts blasting and Dana starts jumping up and down. Camille comes out of the bedroom.)

*Camille: Dana. Dana! DANA!!!*

*Dana: What?*

*Camille: Will you turn that off? You're driving me crazy.*

*Dana: So, what? You're already crazy.*

*Camille: Well, at least I'm not ugly.*

*Dana: Yeah, well you don't have to be ugly to smell bad.*

*Camille: First of all, I'm not the one who smells bad. You are.*

*Dana: No, I'm not. You are.*

I hope the difference is clear. In the first scene, all of the factual offers were accepted as soon as they were made; who they were, where they were, and any facts about their relationship and history. Nobody's offer was blocked. The Dramatic Conflict was born from the clash of opposing objectives. Camille wanted to go to sleep and Dana wanted to jazzercise. The characters said "no" to each other but not the improvisers. The improvisers said "yes" to each other's offers of building a scene of Dramatic Conflict together. As a result, the scene was dramatically interesting, the characters were further developed, and their relationship was further defined.

In the second scene, the improviser playing Dana starts off with a "make wrong" when she says, "Camille, you're late. I hate it when you're late, Camille. I just hate it."

Talk about making your partner wrong. She can't even walk into the scene correctly. Notice how there are no competing objectives at play to justify this as Dramatic Conflict. And, imagine how it feels for the improviser playing Camille to be greeted in that fashion by her scene partner. It feels awful, of course, and it puts her on the defensive, "Hey, back off. I had a hard day at work."

From there they block each other's offers about whether Camille is the maid and then spend the rest of the scene insulting each other. Conflict? Maybe. Dramatic Conflict? Helpful to the play? Of interest to an audience? No, definitely not.

To sum it up, Dramatic Conflict is the result of two Main Forces with opposing objectives struggling to achieve their own at the expense of the other. In order to do so, they employ a series of tactics. The tactics will often cause the characters to disagree, but that is not the same thing as the improvisers blocking, arguing, or making each other wrong—three mistakes that are to be avoided at all cost.

## Resolution

In order for a scene of Dramatic Conflict to end, there must be a Resolution to the conflict. The Resolution will happen in one of two ways: either one of the Forces will be victorious over the other and achieve its objective, or neither of the Forces will be victorious over the other and there will be a stalemate.

The Resolution is most closely correlated to The Climax in the structural map of a play. However, The Climax requires the involvement of a third character, or third Force; this is not so with The Resolution of a scene. It is perfectly common and satisfying for one of the Forces simply to be defeated by the other. This is because of the difference between a play and a scene. The ending of a play must serve to complete the whole and determine the ultimate fate of the characters. That's a big responsibility, and it requires the power of a dramatic Climax in order to pull it off. The ending of a scene, on the other hand, must not complete the whole. And, as opposed to determining the ultimate fate of the characters, it usually serves to cast it further into turmoil.

Let me demonstrate the two possible endings, victory or stalemate, by adding the final few lines to our scene between Dana and Camille:

### ENDING #1: VICTORY

*Dana: (Holding back the tears.) That hurt me, Camille. That really hurt. Especially coming from you, my best friend. You know that I am still very tender from my breakup with Brad. And, I am looking for work. Every day. At the gym. But, they keep saying "no," no matter how much I ask. And, I've just been experiencing a lot of rejection lately, from Brad, from the gym.*

*And the only thing I have, right now, to make me feel good about myself, is my jazzercise. Please, Camille, just let me do my jazzercise. Please.*

*Camille: Dana, either turn that thing off or pack your stuff and leave.*

*Dana: Fine. If that's the way you want it, Camille. Then, fine.*

(She turns it off.)

*There it's off. Are you happy? It's off. Jeez, some friend you turned out to be.*

(Exit, Dana.)

## **ENDING #2: STALEMATE**

*Dana: (Holding back the tears.) That hurt me, Camille. That really hurt. Especially coming from you, my best friend. You know that I am still very tender from my breakup with Brad. And, I am looking for work. Everyday. At the gym. But, they keep saying "no," no matter how much I ask. And, I've just been experiencing a lot of rejection lately, from Brad, from the gym. And the only thing I have, right now, to make me feel good about myself, is my jazzercise. Please, Camille, just let me do my jazzercise. Please.*

*Camille: Dana, either turn that thing off or pack your stuff and leave.*

*Dana: No! I won't! I won't turn it off and I won't pack my stuff. Because you are my best friend Camille Capaccio, and I want you start behaving like it.*

*Camille: Fine! If you won't turn it off, I will.*

(She takes the DVD from the player and breaks it in half.)

*Dana: Oh, that is it! You are never getting to sleep now!*

At the end of version #1, Camille is victorious. Dana abandons her objective, and we can assume that Camille will be able to get some sleep. At the end of version #2, there is a stalemate. Dana is not able to jazzercise, and Camille is not going to get any peace.

## **The New Platform**

By the end of a Substantial Scene, two important things must happen: something must be significantly different, for at least one of the characters (or Main Forces), from what it was in the beginning, and the following scene must be set into motion.

These are the elements of the new Platform that is built at the end of the scene; the change that has taken place is firmly presented to the audience, establishing the new status quo, and the following scene is set into motion.

Here is The Platform from the first ending of our Dana and Camille Scene:

*Dana: Fine. If that's the way you want it, Camille.  
Then, fine.*

(She turns it off.)

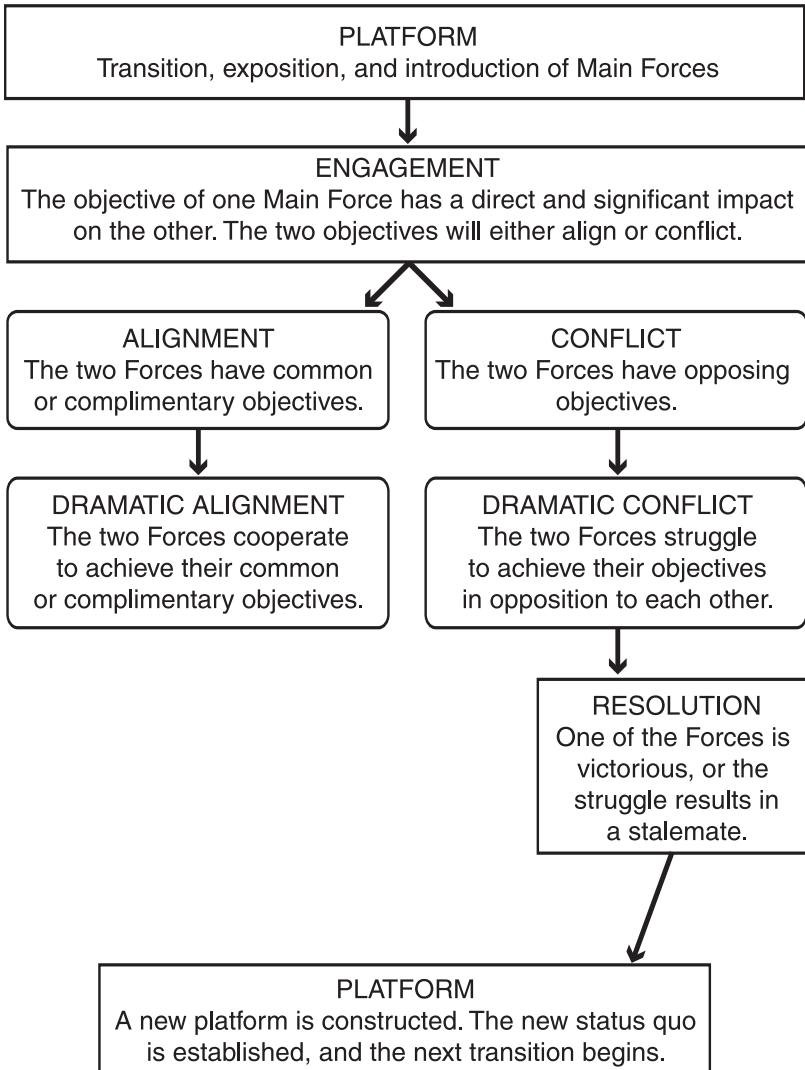
*There it's off. Are you happy? It's off. Jeez,  
some friend you turned out to be.*

(Exit, Dana.)

The change that has taken place is that Dana no longer considers Camille to be the same type of friend that she was in the beginning. Their relationship is significantly different from what it was. And, by Dana exiting the apartment, the next scene is set in motion as the audience is left to wonder where Dana is going and whether she will mend her friendship with Camille.

Here, then, is our flowchart with the complete flow of a Dramatic Conflict scene:

### COMPLETE FLOW OF DRAMATIC CONFLICT



## **From Dramatic Alignment to the new Platform**

We have seen how the action flows from the Dramatic Conflict, through The Resolution, to the new Platform. Let's back up and track the flow of the action for a scene of Dramatic Alignment.

If the objectives of the Main Forces align, then one of two things will happen. The first possibility is that they will cooperate to achieve their common or complementary objective and achieve it. At that point, the new Platform is built, and the scene is over.

The second possibility is that, in the pursuit of their common objective, they encounter an obstacle in the form of another Force with an opposing objective. In that event, the scene will change from a scene of dramatic alliance to a scene of Dramatic Conflict, and the remainder of the scene will unfold as such.

For an example of this second possibility, let's go back to our two prisoners who want to escape from their cell. This is clearly a scene of dramatic alliance. The two prisoners will cooperate in order to help each other achieve their common objective. However, let's suppose that halfway through the escape, the warden discovers their empty cell and begins to pursue them through their escape tunnel. Suddenly, a new Force is introduced with an opposing objective; the criminals want to escape, and the warden wants to prevent them from escaping. We are now in a scene of Dramatic Conflict.

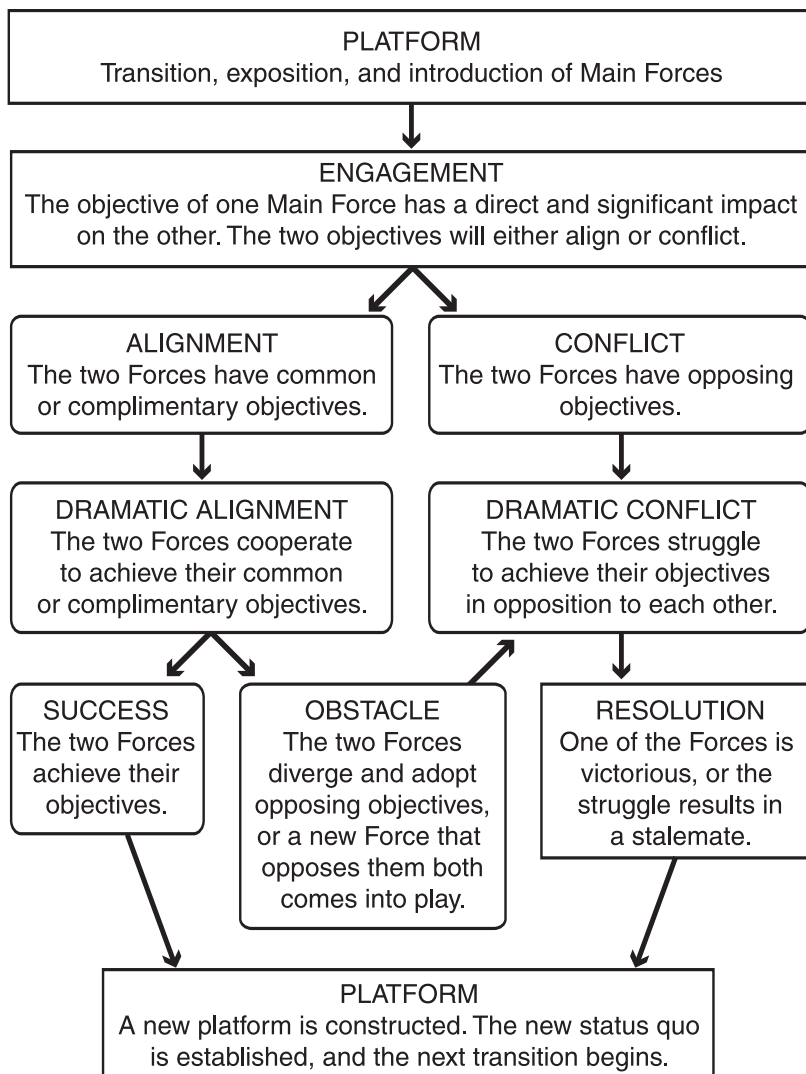
Another manifestation of this is when, rather than introducing a new Force, one of the Forces that is in the alliance changes objectives in the middle of the scene. For an example of this, let's pay one more visit to Dana and Camille and let's just say that when Camille asks Dana to turn off her jazzercise DVD,

Dana agrees and promises to help Camille get some sleep. Camille thanks her and goes into bed. We are now in a scene of dramatic alliance. The two Forces have complementary objectives: Camille wants to go to sleep, and Dana wants to help her go to sleep. Dana, however, trying to help Camille sleep, tiptoes into Camille's bedroom in order to make sure that the shade is drawn. This disturbs Camille, who becomes annoyed, and asks Dana to please just stay out of her room and let her go to sleep. We have now hit a new Moment of Engagement—Camille telling Dana to stay out of her room—which changes the scene from one of Dramatic Alignment to one of Dramatic Conflict. Dana's objective remains the same; to help Camille go to sleep. But, Camille's objective has changed from wanting to go to sleep to wanting Dana to leave her room. Each time Dana thinks Camille has fallen asleep, she tiptoes back into Camille's room to make sure that it is cool enough, that the alarm clock is disabled, and that the pillow is fluffed. And each time Camille wakes up and becomes more annoyed. The Forces have remained the same, but one of them has changed its objective and the scene has transformed from one of Dramatic Alignment to one of Dramatic Conflict.

It is perfectly okay and, in fact, very common for objectives to change throughout the course of a Substantial Scene. As a result, a scene may flip back and forth between alignment and conflict several times before it reaches The Resolution. In fact, the more spontaneous and in the moment that the improvisers remain, and the more they allow themselves to be changed and affected by their partner's offers, the more this is likely to happen.

Here, then, is a final look at our flowchart, complete with the flow of a scene of Dramatic Alignment:

## THE FLOW OF A SUBSTANTIAL SCENE



Notice on the flowchart that there is an arrow connecting Dramatic Conflict to Alignment. This creates an inner loop that allows for the frequent occurrence of several shifts from Dramatic Conflict to Dramatic Alignment during the course of a Substantial Scene.

### ***Exercise #13: Follow the Flow***

Two or three players improvise a Substantial Scene while another player watches from the outside and tracks the action on the “Flow of a Substantial Scene” flowchart provided in this book. At the end of the scene, the observer analyzes the flow of the action for the players.

#### **A TIP FOR SUCCESS:**

*This is more an exercise for the observer than it is for the players in the scene. The players should not feel hampered by the need to satisfy the flowchart. They should simply improvise the best Substantial Scene they can. The conversation inspired by the analysis can include topics such as: Was it a satisfying scene? Did it track successfully? If not, where and why did it get off track? If so, were the players making conscious choices to help the flow, or did it happen naturally?*

### ***Exercise #14: Channel the Flow***

In this version, the flow of the Substantial Scene is chosen in advance, and the players are tasked with fulfilling it. The three choices of flow are:

1. A scene of Dramatic Conflict
2. A scene of Dramatic Alignment
3. A scene in which Dramatic Alignment becomes one of Dramatic Conflict

#### **A TIP FOR SUCCESS:**

*The more you focus on structure, the more you need to ground yourself in the three principles of improvisation:*

*be spontaneous, always make your partner look good, and always say “yes.” An improviser must always walk the line between spontaneity and structure—substance and form.*

## **Extending the Action**

In movies, television shows, and typical short form–style improvisation, dramatic events may unfold rather rapidly. For example, in a ten-second scene near the end of a movie, a deceived wife can enter her adulterous husband’s hospital room, ask the nurse to leave, triumphantly serve him with divorce papers, scorn his startled look of surprise and dismay, and exit triumphantly with time enough for a fade-to-black on the destroyed husband’s face.

Similarly, in a typical short form–style improv scene, two minutes seems plenty of time for a shipwreck, capture by natives, heroic escape, marital squabble between the American tourists who were on the cruise, love connection between the annoyed wife and the chief of the native tribe, and unfortunate death of all by meteor from outer space.

Not so in a full-length play. In a full-length play, and in a Substantial Scene, action must unfold at a pace that is in keeping with the significance of the material. Otherwise, it will not have a strong enough impact on the audience. In a two-hour play, or a ten-minute Substantial Scene, characters, events, and exchanges of dialogue that pass before the audience in a matter of seconds are automatically deemed unimportant and quickly forgotten.

For example, let’s imagine that the play has just begun and we are building our Foundation. Player 1 hits upon the idea of establishing a routine in which the wealthy, old matriarch of an aristocratic family is constantly fawned upon by her superficial

grandson in order to safeguard his inclusion in her will. He creates the character of Biff, and the scene unfolds like this:

*Biff: Grandmother, darling! You look fabulous!*

*Grandmother Hollister: Thank you, Biff.*

*Biff: And Hollister Mansion! It's never looked better!*

*Grandmother Hollister: Biff, you're just a big flatterer.*

*Biff: What can I do for you, Grandmother? Are you comfortable? Can I fluff your pillow? Refresh your drink? Review your will?*

*Grandmother Hollister: What? Nonsense, Biff, I'm just fine. Now, do sit down.*

*Biff: Grandmother, I couldn't possibly. I'm far too excited. I am absolutely bursting with excitement. I have news, Grandmother Hollister. I have wonderful, wonderful news.*

*Grandmother Hollister: News? What is it?*

*Biff: I'm getting married!*

*Grandmother Hollister: Married, to whom?*

*Biff: To Eleanor Bunt!*

*Grandmother Hollister: Eleanor Bunt?! Impossible, Biff! You know that the Bunts and the Hollisters are involved in a feud.*

*Biff: But, Grandmother!*

(Enter, the butler.)

*James: Pardon, Mrs. Hollister, but Mr. Gerald Bunt is at the door.*

*Grandmother Hollister: Mr. Bunt!*

*Biff: Eleanor's father?*

(Enter Mr. Bunt.)

*Mr. Bunt: Emily Hollister!*

*Grandmother Hollister: Gerald Bunt! How dare you barge in here like that?*

*Mr. Bunt: Never mind that, Mrs. Hollister, I demand that you keep your grandson away from my daughter!*

*Grandmother Hollister: Why, you old goat! It's time you knew! Eleanor Bunt is not your daughter!*

*Biff: Grandmother!*

*Mr. Bunt: What are you talking about?*

*Grandmother Hollister: She's mine! She's mine! The result of an impetuous and embarrassing affair at the age of fifty-five! In order to avoid the scandal, I confided in Beatrice, your wife and my best friend, recently deceased. At that time, you and she were trying to have children, but all of your efforts were in vain. Rather than bruise your precious male ego, Beatrice and I decided that she would feign pregnancy, take my child, and present it to you as your own. I went away for a year of travel, and when I returned I gave her my child. It was then that we decided to stage a quarrel and cause the feud, so that all of our people would remain apart and the family resemblance between me and my daughter, Eleanor, would never be recognized.*

*Biff: But, that means—!*

*Grandmother Hollister: Yes! Eleanor Bunt is your aunt!*

*Mr. Bunt: And there's no further reason for the feud between our families!*

*Grandmother Hollister: No, Mr. Bunt, there isn't. There never was.*

*Mr. Bunt: In that case, Mrs. Hollister . . . Emily. There is something I have been longing to say to you.*

*Grandmother Hollister: Gerald.*

*Mr. Bunt: I love you, Emily. I always have.*

*Grandmother Hollister: Gerald. Beatrice was my friend, my best friend.*

*Mr. Bunt: Beatrice is dead.*

(Gerald and Emily are drawn into a romantic embrace.)

Enter, Eleanor.)

*Eleanor: Father! Grandmother Hollister! What, on earth, are you doing?!*

*Biff: Eleanor! Eleanor! The marriage! It can never take place!*

Now, the scene above can be performed on stage in just about a minute and a half. Notice everything that happens; Biff fawns over Grandmother Hollister and mentions her will, he announces his engagement to Eleanor Bunt, Grandmother Hollister forbids the match because of a family feud, Eleanor's father arrives and demands that Biff keep away from his daughter, Grandmother Hollister reveals that Eleanor is not Mr. Bunt's daughter, Mr. Bunt reveals his secret love for Grandmother Hollister, Eleanor enters, and Biff tells her that their engagement is off. In a minute and a half! While there might be enough entertainment value in the fast-paced, farcical nature of the action for a short-form improv scene, it would simply never do for a Substantial Scene in *The Foundation* of a full-length play. It just doesn't spend enough time on any one beat to give it the weight and substance it requires.

The audience does not know if it is meant to concern itself with Biff's relationship to his Grandmother, his relationship to Eleanor, the feud between the families, the relationship between Grandmother Hollister and her secret daughter, the newly

expressed love between Grandmother Hollister and Mr. Bunt, or Eleanor's feelings about her engagement being broken off. The audience will also be unable to remember everything that has happened as the play proceeds. It certainly does not fulfill player 1's initial instinct of establishing a routine in which Biff fawns over his Grandmother in order to secure his inclusion in her will.

In a scene like this, the audience will have to work very hard in order to keep up with the pace of the action and will quickly learn that they are not expected to form an attachment to any one event or relationship. Not to mention the fact that, even after so much has happened, the improvisers still have forty-three-and-a-half minutes to go in the first act!

Now, compare the scene above with the one that follows:

*Biff: Grandmother, darling! You look fabulous!*

*Grandmother Hollister: Thank you, Biff.*

*Biff: And Hollister Mansion! It's never looked better!*

*Grandmother Hollister: Biff, you're just a big flatterer.*

*Biff: Where did you get that painting? It's absolutely beautiful. Grandmother, you have such an eye for art!*

*Grandmother Hollister: Thank you, Biff. I bought it at Rawley's.*

*Biff: Where is one to cast his eye? On the glorious artwork, the exquisite crystal, the magnificent Steinway, or on the dear, sweet lady whose natural beauty surpasses them all?*

*Grandmother Hollister: Biff, you are making me blush.*

*Biff: What can I do for you, Grandmother? Are you comfortable?*

*Grandmother Hollister: Perfectly, Biff.*

*Biff: How is your pillow? May I fluff it?*

*Grandmother Hollister: Please, just sit and relax.*

*Biff: May I raise it?*

*Grandmother Hollister: Nonsense, Biff, my pillow is fine.*

*Biff: Shall I bring you another, then, to add to your bliss?*

*Grandmother Hollister: Please, Biff, you mustn't always make such a fuss when you visit me.*

*Biff: Grandma, it isn't any fuss. I enjoy being kind to you.*

*Grandmother Hollister: Biff, you were always such an angel.*

*Biff: Grandmother, that's only because your company is like being in heaven. How is your drink? Do you have enough ice?*

*Grandmother Hollister: Of course, I do, Biff.*

*Biff: Shall I pour a drop more?*

*Grandmother Hollister: It's perfectly fine.*

*Biff: Shall I dab the condensation with my pocket handkerchief?*

*Grandmother Hollister: Biff, my darling, do sit down. Sit down and tell me all about your time at university.*

*Biff: Oh, it's fine enough, I suppose. Although being so far from you for months at a stretch makes it dreary at times. And worrisome, Grandmother. I worry that you're left alone so often. I don't suppose my cousin Edgar ever visits you when I'm away. Does he?*

*Grandmother Hollister: Edgar? No, I don't see Edgar very often.*

*Biff: No, and here he is just twenty minutes down the road. Ah, well. Who can explain why some*

*people love their Grandmothers, and Edgar doesn't?*

*Grandmother Hollister: Biff!*

*Biff: Yes, you're right, let's not even speak of him. We shall all get what we deserve in the end. Isn't that right, Grandmother?*

*Grandmother Hollister: What?*

*Biff: That we shall all get what we deserve in the end.*

*Grandmother Hollister: Biff. Do sit down.*

Notice how, here, condensed dialogue has been expanded, and the action of Biff fawning over his Grandmother is extended to encompass a substantial and significant amount of stage time. For example, in version #1 Biff says, "What can I do for you, Grandmother? Are you comfortable? Can I fluff your pillow? Refresh your drink? Review your will?" In version #2, that speech is expanded into many lines of dialogue:

*Biff: What can I do for you, Grandmother? Are you comfortable?*

*Grandmother Hollister: Perfectly, Biff.*

*Biff: How is your pillow? May I fluff it?*

*Grandmother Hollister: Please, just sit and relax.*

*Biff: May I raise it?*

*Grandmother Hollister: Nonsense, Biff, my pillow is fine.*

*Biff: Shall I bring you another, then, to add to your bliss?*

In the first example, Biff zips through his intention of fawning over his grandmother, and then immediately proceeds to The Moment of Engagement by announcing his intention to marry Eleanor. From there, several new Forces are consistently and rapidly introduced resulting in several new Moments of Engagement and

several absurd fluctuations between alignment and conflict. Again, this is funny enough for a short-form improv scene, and maybe even very effective as a purposefully ridiculous revelation scene in a well-constructed farce, but not effective at all for a standard Substantial Scene in full-length play.

Notice, as a contrast, that in the second example, the entire piece of dialogue is, in fact, all part of The Platform of what promises to be a much longer scene. There hasn't been a Moment of Engagement yet. As a result, the audience has time to process what they're watching and to understand that Biff's routine with his Grandmother is intended to be important to the rest of the story. Also, the improvisers have time to relax into the scene. They do not feel pressured to blurt everything out all at once for fear of the scene being taken away from them before they are finished with it. They are not only able to begin establishing a solid routine but they also have time to develop their characters, ease into their relationship, create the physical environment, and introduce Edgar, an important offstage character, who can enter the play at any time.

The skill lies in extending the action; that is, discovering what lies at the heart of your scene and presenting it to the audience in deliberate, patient, and progressive stages.

### ***Exercise #15: Extend the Action***

Two or three players improvise a one-minute scene. After discussing the action and agreeing on the "heart of the scene," they do it again, but this time, they extend the action so that it becomes a five-minute scene.

### **A TIP FOR SUCCESS:**

*Remember, the point is not to lengthen the scene by adding new events; the point is to lengthen the scene by building more slowly to the revelation of what's already*

*there. This is done by adding texture and substance through relaxed dialogue, character and environment descriptions, monologues, physical activity, and even comfortable silences.*

### ***Exercise #16: The Long, Two-Character Substantial Scene***

Well, the name says it all. Two players perform a Substantial Scene of no less than ten minutes. No other players may join the scene to help.

#### **A TIP FOR SUCCESS:**

*Force the scene to last ten minutes. Even if it completely breaks down and nobody knows what to do, just stand there and do nothing until the ten minutes are up. This is important in order to appreciate what ten minutes of uninterrupted stage time is all about and to build the ability to fill it with only two characters.*

After practicing the long, two-person Substantial Scene, continue on with three-, four-, and five-person scenes. The trick is to keep the focus on the two Main Forces! If your character is not one of the two Main Forces, whose objectives are conflicting or aligning, then your task is to identify the two Main Forces and join the scene in such a way as to support the objective of one or the other.

Once your group has achieved a level of comfort with the long Substantial Scene, you can go back to the full dramatic arc of the Play by Play Structural Map and begin improvising longer and longer complete plays. Try to reach a half hour one-act play, before moving on to the next part of the book.

Have fun!



# Creating Characters

**Characters, of course, are an essential** part of a compelling story and a well-constructed play. As important as it is to have a sound and sturdy plot, it is the characters that will capture the heart and soul of the audience. Our connection to the characters makes us laugh and cry, and our connection to the characters serves as our gateway into the drama's profound world of the universal human condition. I have never seen an audience rise to its feet and cheer for the success of a First Significant Event.

## ***Exercise #17: Character Clay***

This is a fun exercise for building spontaneous characters based on character endowments from the other players. The group forms a circle, and player 1 stands in the center. The players in the circle take turns giving player 1 character endowments such as, "This character is fifty years old." "She's always very nervous." "She giggles when she talks." "She loves children." "She dreams of being a movie star."

As each endowment is offered, player 1 incorporates it into her physical creation of the character. The last person in the circle offers not another endowment but a physical activity. For example, "She's folding laundry."

Player 1 begins the physical activity, thus allowing the character to further develop in silence. At last, the players in the circle

begin to ask the character questions to which the character responds. For example, “Tell me about your family.” “Where do you work?” “What are your aspirations?” etc.

### **A TIP FOR SUCCESS:**

*It’s helpful to start asking very specific and immediate questions such as, “What are you holding in your hand?” or “What type of room are you in?” rather than starting off with more conceptual questions such as “What is your greatest fear?” Also, it seems best to save the question, “What is your name?” for later on in the process. If that question is asked too early then player 1 is forced to make an arbitrary choice rather than allow her name to occur to her more organically as she gets to know her character.*

*For the player in the center, it’s important to keep doing the suggested activity all throughout the questioning process. Imagine that you are alone in the space, and the questions are just voices in your head, to which you are responding, rather than real people.*

A great way to develop a character, in the actual course of a play, is by taking some time on stage to deliver a nice, long character monologue. Your onstage partner can help by providing inspirational prompts to keep the monologue from ending too soon.

### **Exercise #18: Character Trampoline**

Player 1 delivers a character monologue, and player 2 provides occasional inspirational prompts to help the monologue continue. The metaphor here is that player 1 is leaping into the air by delivering the monologue, and player 2 is the trampoline that helps her bounce back up if she falls to the ground. If it makes it easier,

practice by beginning the monologue with, “I remember when I was six years old . . . ” Here’s an example:

*Player 1: I remember when I was six years old. We lived in the country, just mother and me. Lonely place, the country. The nearest neighbor was two and a half miles away. And, mother was feeble; she had me very late, you know. I seem to remember that it was always very cold. Of course, the summers had to be hot, but all I can remember is the bitter, bitter cold. I hated the cold. I hated the cold, and I hated the loneliness . . .*

*Player 2: And that’s when the problem started, isn’t it?*

*Player 1: Yes, that’s right! That’s when it started! That’s when I started talking to the chickens and seeking acceptance in their feathered community. So warm. So fluffy. So Soft. Oh! There I was, at the tender age of six, alone and cold, and nothing to do but make friends with the chickens . . .*

*Player 2: But, they wouldn’t have you, would they?*

*Player 1: No, they wouldn’t! They wouldn’t! THEY WOULDN’T!!! And, neither would the ducks. Or the geese. Or the pigs. And that’s when I knew for the first time that I was destined to be alone. Alone and alienated from everyone around me. And that’s how I’ve lived for the past twenty years. Alone and afraid. Unworthy of friendship. Unworthy of love.*

*Player 2: But, it doesn’t have to be like that.*

*Player 1: No, it doesn’t! I’m not six years old anymore. I’m twenty-six! I’m big, and I don’t have to act*

*like that poor, pathetic child on the farm. I can go and make friends, and join clubs, and have parties! Oh, grand, magnificent parties with music and caviar and bottles upon bottles of flowing champagne.*

*Player 2: And the main course?*

*Player 1: Yes. Chicken!*

The fun of using the Character Trampoline is in learning something new about your character by the end of the monologue and making it important to the rest of the play. In the example above, player 1 can draw on any one of a number of discoveries—his aversion to cold, his latent resentment of his mother, his hatred of being alone, his low self-esteem, and his love/hate relationship with chickens—to fuel his motivations throughout the remainder of the play.

Now, although our characters must be created spontaneously, it is important to remember that they are not being created in a vacuum. They are being created within the context of a play, and in order to be fully appreciated by the audience, they must exist in service to the plot.

People love stories, and they know when they're hearing a good one. If a character is introduced that distracts from the story, the audience will only be annoyed, regardless of how poignant the character or how brilliant the performance is. A character that exists in service of the plot is certain to contribute to the story rather than distract from it.

In order to service the plot, the character must first be “requested” by the plot. For an obvious example, if an offer in *The Foundation* makes it clear that Cecily visits Jonathan every Monday at seven o'clock, and we then learn that it's Monday, and we then learn that it's seven o'clock, then guess what! The plot is

requesting a character, and that character is Cecily. Nothing will be less satisfying to an audience than if the doorbell rings and anyone other than Cecily enters the stage.

For a more sophisticated example, let's assume that we learned in *The Foundation* that Monica is a rebellious teen and is about to go back to school after having been expelled for the fifth time in five months. For *The First Significant Event*, her mother tells her that if she gets expelled again, she is going to a home for juvenile delinquents.

So, now we are in *The Foundation Focus*. We know that the job of *The Foundation Focus* is to raise the dramatic stakes of *The First Significant Event*. What might do that? Well, anything that puts Monica in danger by increasing the odds of her getting expelled. The plot, then, is requesting a character to enter the story and do just that.

Now, there are many different characters who are capable of meeting this request, and any or all of them would be welcome in the play. It could be her best friend who tempts her to cut class and smoke a joint in the schoolyard, it could be the school principal who warns her that he's going to be watching her like a hawk, it could be the gorgeous captain of the school football team who wants her to help him cheat on the chemistry exam, or it could be any of a dozen other different ideas. They would all be welcome because they would all increase the odds of Monica getting expelled, achieve the goal of *The Foundation Focus*, and service the needs of the plot.

Think what would happen to the story if, instead of meeting any of the characters above, Monica goes to the school cafeteria and meets Gladys the Lunch Lady who launches into a fabulously funny monologue about the school menu, and this is followed by a meeting with Linda, the photographer for the school year book, who takes Monica's picture, and finally an encounter with Shannon, the senior class president, who begs her to sign a student

petition for wider parking spaces in the student parking lot. While all of those characters might be terribly entertaining, none of them would be helpful to the story because none of them would have been requested by the plot. Even if the audience is entertained by the goofy shenanigans of Gladys the Lunch Lady for as long as Gladys cares to goof, they will ultimately be disappointed if she does not contribute to the story by servicing the needs of the plot.

***Exercise #19: This Is a Job for . . . !***

Here's a silly, little exercise for drilling the creation of characters that are being requested by the play and that will exist in service to the plot. Player 1 makes an offer establishing the relationship and the location. Player 2 makes an offer introducing a problem. Player 3 shouts, "Stand back! This is a job for . . . !" and then completes the sentence by announcing who she is so that it's clear why she's the perfect person to solve the problem.

Here are some examples:

*Player 1: Peter, Mother's home!*

*Player 2: Mom, there's a spider on the counter!*

*Player 3: Stand back! This is a job for your muscle-bound next-door neighbor who is always trying to score points with your mom!*

*Player 1: Candice, isn't the Vatican beautiful?*

*Player 2: Yes, Aunt, but look! The Pope is having a heart attack!*

*Player 3: Stand back! This is a job for Dr. Ecumenical, physician to the prophets of the Lord!*

*Player 1: Wise hermit, I have journeyed many years to find you in your cave.*

*Player 2: You! But, I'm innocent, I tell you. Innocent!*

*Player 3: Stand back! This is a job for Reginald P.  
Jones, Esquire!*

One of the joys of improvising a full-length play is that your character does not have to appear on stage fully developed. In fact, part of the fun is experiencing the creation of your character, along with the audience, as it develops progressively throughout the course of the play. There are many ways of adding depth and significance to a character throughout the course of a play. I'll offer several and follow each with an exercise.

## **Character Endowments**

The most interesting aspects of characters are often revealed not by what they say about themselves but by what other characters say about them. The best gift that you can give your partner in an improvised play is a steady barrage of character endowments.

### ***Exercise #20: The Two-Line Endowment Drill***

Player 1 makes an offer that establishes the relationship, and player 2 makes an offer that endows player 1's character:

*Player 1: I am ready, Monsieur. You may paint my portrait.*

*Player 2: Ah, merci! It is an honor to immortalize the image of Madame Solvant, the wealthiest and most influential woman in all of France!*

### ***Exercise #21: Endowment Ping Pong***

Player 1 and player 2 improvise an exchange of dialogue in which every single offer adds an endowment to the other's character:

*Player 1: Professor! You grew a beard!*

*Player 2: Simon! Back from congress?*

*Player 1: Yes, to seek your help. You are the preeminent authority on global warming.*

*Player 2: Ah, yes! I read about your initiative on the floor. It's an uphill battle, you know. But, then again, Simon Lapinsky was never a man to shrink from a challenge.*

*Player 1: And Professor Potsdam was never a man to turn his back on a former student in need.*

*Player 2: Simon, such a marvelous knack for enlisting the support of others. What can I do for you?*

*Player 1: Well, Professor, I know that you're an enthusiastic conspiracy theorist—*

*Player 2: Simon, how careless of you! They have microphones everywhere! That loose lip of yours shall be your downfall, yet.*

### **A TIP FOR SUCCESS:**

*Avoid making your partner bad, wrong, or stupid with too many negative endowments.*

Notice how everything we know about Simon, that he's a congressman with an initiative on the floor, that he is not afraid of challenges, and that he easily gains the support of others and suffers from an occasional loose lip, came from the professor. Similarly, all that we know of the professor, that he has a beard, that he's the preeminent authority on global warming, that he always helps his former students, and that he sees conspiracies everywhere, came from Simon.

In addition to offering character endowments to your onstage partners, it's helpful to offer character endowments

to your offstage partners by describing characters that have not yet entered the story. This type of “character conjuring” allows your offstage partner the gift of stepping into a character that the story has requested and the audience is eagerly anticipating.

### ***Exercise #22: Character Conjuring***

Player 1 and player 2 improvise a short scene in which they endow an offstage character. The endowment can include a physical description, vocal quality, personality traits, habits, etc. When players 1 and 2 are finished, player 3 enters as the character and fulfills the endowments:

*Player 1: Jason, Ms. Parker is on her way up in the elevator. Is the conference room ready for her presentation?*

*Player 2: Yes, Ms. Peabody, we’re all set in here. I even closed the blinds because I know how sensitive she is to sunlight.*

*Player 1: Thank you, Jason. And, be sure to have plenty of water available for her. You know how quickly she strains her voice and how horribly it croaks.*

*Player 2: I will, Ms. Peabody. I promise. Oh, and I have her entire speech written out on these cue cards. I know that she said it wasn’t necessary, but you know how sketchy her memory can be.*

*Player 1: Good thinking, Jason. Just be tactful, you know how defensive she can be.*

*Player 2: Yes, and impetuous, too!*

(Enter, Ms. Parker.)

*Player 3: Oh, for Christ's sake, it's bright in here!  
Where the heck did I put my sunglasses?  
You, there!*

(Clearing her throat several times as her voice begins to croak.)  
*You think I'm too old for this, don't you? Well,  
I'm not. So, you're fired!*

## **In Contrast to Another Character**

A fabulous way to create a character, that is sure to inspire a lively interaction on stage, is to create one in direct contrast to another. Neil Simon capitalized on this in his famous play *The Odd Couple*. Oscar is sloppy, unrefined, and easygoing, whereas Felix is fastidious, cultured, and anxious. When you put two characters like that together on stage, the scene is a veritable breeding ground for Dramatic Conflict.

In addition to creating two characters that are bound to have an interesting chemistry, this device can benefit the play in a more sophisticated way by having one of the characters serve as a dramatic foil for the other. That is, an important trait of one character is highlighted by the contrasting trait in the other. For example, let's assume a story about an ambitious, corporate ladder-climber named Margaret and her lazy, unemployed roommate named Michelle. As part of The Foundation Focus, Michelle is dumped by her boyfriend because he's fed up with her laziness and lack of direction in life. Following that, Margaret comes home and announces, ecstatically, that she has just been promoted to senior vice president. Margaret will be serving as a dramatic foil to Michelle as the success of one makes the stagnation of the other more prominent. Such a moment is a powerful way of bringing a character to a new level of self-awareness.

The foil character needn't even be a large role in order to have its effect. A single, well-placed line by a minor character can do the job just fine.

### **Exercise #23: Character Foil**

Player 1 and player 2 improvise a scene throughout which the characters are developed in contrast to one another:

*Player 1: Hey, Jimmy, look. It's a cave.*

*Player 2: A cave?*

*Player 1: Yeah, come on, let's go inside.*

*Player 2: Oh, uh . . . Okay. Yeah, let's go inside.*

(They enter the cave.)

*Player 1: Wow, I bet that nobody's been in here for a million years!*

*Player 2: Hey, we better get out of here, Barry. I'm kind of scared.*

*Player 1: Aw, you don't have to be scared, Jimmy. I'll protect you. Besides, it's just an old cave.*

*Player 2: But the cemetery's just a mile down the road, Barry. And everyone knows that it's haunted. Maybe this cave is some kind of tunnel for ghosts!*

*Player 1: Jimmy, the scientific community has soundly discredited ghosts.*

*Player 2: Agh! What's that? I heard a noise!*

*Player 1: A scream, from over there around the bend. Quickly, Jimmy, someone needs our help!*

Jimmy, then, becomes cowardly and superstitious as Barry becomes brave and scientific.

#### **A TIP FOR SUCCESS:**

*Notice how player 2 does not allow a weak character to result in weak improvisation. The character is afraid, but the improviser goes into the cave. Player 1 avoided a similar trap. After dismissing the existence of ghosts, it*

*would have been easy for him to block player 2 by dismissing player 2's claim that he heard a noise. "Nonsense, you're just imagining things!" However, he did not allow his character to impair his improvisation. He accepted the noise and built on it to create yet another opportunity to foil the character of his partner.*

## **In Relation to The Environment**

Characters are often defined and developed by the environment in which we see them. The bedroom of a fifteen-year-old, rebellious adolescent heavy-metal-rock fan will look different than the bedroom of her forty-six-year-old, straight-laced, conservative, stock analyst father, and both would provide insight into their inhabitants' characters.

I will have more to say on creating environments for a full-length play later, but we can touch on it now as we look at the environment's relationship to the character. There are two basic ways in which an environment can develop a character: the character can be at home in the environment or the character can be out of place in the environment.

Imagine our fifteen-year-old, rebellious adolescent heavy-metal-rock fan hanging out in her bedroom with her best friend. The room is a mess, planks of wood and plastic milk crates serve as furniture, an electric guitar is lying on the floor, heavy-metal posters cover the walls, black and red light bulbs illuminate the space, and music pumps from the stereo speakers. The character is at home in her environment. She's relaxed and content. The environment itself becomes a manifestation of the character's personality and, in so doing, helps to define and develop it.

Now, imagine that her forty-six-year-old, straight-laced, conservative, stock-analyst father comes into the room. Suddenly,

we have introduced a character who is out of place in the environment. In this case, the environment would serve as a foil to the character and highlight, by contrast, his straight-laced, conservative personality and behavior.

### ***Exercise #24: There's No Place like Home***

Player 1 and player 2 improvise a scene in which the endowment of the environment contributes to the development of player 2's character. The scene ends when player 1 feels satisfied and can say the line, "Wow, just like you." Here's an example:

*Player 1: Jessica, this is your office?*

*Player 2: I know, can you believe it?*

*Player 1: Who would have thought that my old college roommate would have done so well for herself?*

*Player 2: Ginny, it's so good to see you again.*

*Player 1: It's just so neat in here!*

*Player 2: Well, an organized workspace is an efficient workspace.*

*Player 1: Yeah, but nothing on the desk? No papers, no files, no little yellow stickies on the computer monitor. How can you work like that?*

*Player 2: I just don't like everybody knowing what I'm up to all the time.*

*Player 1: Oh, but you should personalize it. Some pictures of the kids, some pictures of Bobby, that adorable, dreamboat of a husband of yours.*

*Player 2: Oh, you know me. I'm kind of private. I don't like to open up too much about my personal life.*

*Player 1: And where did that artwork come from?*

*Player 2: I don't know. It's standard issue. I like it though. It's calm. It's balanced. It's purposeful. I think it's powerful, but focused and restrained.*

*Player 1: Wow, just like you.*

Notice how much is accomplished in this brief exchange. The relationship is established, the environment is created, Jessica's character is defined and developed, and the environment is established as a powerful representation of the character's psyche, emotional life, and personality.

### ***Exercise #25: Hey, This Is No Place like Home!***

Player 1 and player 2 begin a scene in which they focus on creating the environment. Player 3 enters as a character that is out of place in that environment:

*Player 1: Mother, the dining room looks exquisite. I have never seen the china shine so brilliantly or the crystal sparkle so brightly.*

*Player 2: Thank you, Alexis. Do get the silver from the sideboard, will you?*

*Player 1: Of course, Mother. Oh, just look at that view! Just take a look at the magnificent lights of New York City, framed to perfection within the superbly carved woodwork of these tremendous French doors! It's heavenly, Mother, simply heavenly. Oh, Mother. Just like you.*

*Player 2: Nonsense, Darling. This is only a penthouse on Central Park West. "Heavenly" is having my daughter at home again.*

*Player 1: Mother, when Jeb comes up, you will be pleasant to him, won't you?*

*Player 2: Of course, Darling. He is your husband, after all.*

(Enter Player 3, as Jeb.)

*Player 3: Alexis?*

*Player 1: Jeb, come in. Come in.*

*Player 3: Well, my word! This place is bigger than a cornfield! And look at the view. Shoot, I ain't never been up this high before! Shoot, I bet Prairieville, Nebraska, don't ain't even got nothing nowheres as high as this!*

So, Jeb's country-bumpkin personality is made prominent as it is foiled and brought into bas-relief by the elegant, sophisticated urban environment. It is worth taking note that we also have the character of Mother "at home" in the scene, thus defining two characters with one environment.

There is great power in creating a character in relation to the environment because it allows the theater to speak in its most elegant language, symbolism. The environment itself becomes a visual symbol that represents the character. Once the symbolic vocabulary is established, it can be used to an extremely dramatic effect.

Think again about our fifteen-year-old, rebellious adolescent heavy-metal-rock fan and her forty-six-year-old, straight-laced, conservative, stock-analyst father. Imagine that once inside her bedroom, he loses his temper and explodes at her for repeatedly blasting her music at all hours of the day and night. He shouts at her to "clean up this pig sty!" and start living like a normal human being. To emphasize his point, he pulls the plug on her stereo, turns off the black and red light bulbs, and returns the room to its conventional lighting. He storms out, leaving his daughter and her friend in mortified silence.

If the environment is successfully established as a symbol for the character, then the father's physical attack on the bedroom is, just as profoundly, a personal and emotional attack on his daughter.

Let's revisit Jessica's neat, impersonal office. Imagine the story goes on to concern Jessica's relationship with her husband, Bobby. Their marriage is strained because Bobby feels shut out by Jessica's tightly controlled passions and closely guarded emotional life. If, during the course of the play, Jessica changed and allowed herself to become more vulnerable with Bobby, her emotional journey could be symbolized by the physical changes that she makes to her environment. Perhaps, she finally displays that picture of her and Bobby, kissing in the rain, on her office desk.

### **In Relation to an Object**

This is similar to creating a character in relation to the environment, but instead of the place, it is an object that inspires the character and becomes the symbol. A wonderful example of this is in Tennessee Williams's *The Glass Menagerie*. Laura, shy and socially awkward, is represented by a glass unicorn, her favorite piece in her prized collection of glass animals. She relates to the unicorn because they are both "different." Finally, Laura finds herself in a romantic situation with a young man that she has always been fond of, and this acceptance makes her feel normal and healthy for the first time in her life. As the two of them are dancing in the living room, they bump into a table and knock the delicate unicorn to the floor, causing it to lose its horn. The young man apologizes, but Laura doesn't mind a bit. Losing his horn, she explains, was a "blessing in disguise." It will make him feel "less freakish . . . more at home with the other horses." Laura's own transformation from being alienated to being accepted is dramatically symbolized by the unicorn losing its horn.

#### ***Exercise #26: You Know What You're Like?***

Player 1 delivers a monologue that begins with the phrase, "You know what you're like?" to player 2 and goes on to describe how player 2 is like a certain object in the environment. When the

metaphor is clearly established, player 2 delivers a line or two that fulfills the endowment.

*Player 1: You know what you're like, Uncle Stanley?  
You're like that old, leather chair in the corner.  
You're soft, and comfortable, and always there  
for anybody who needs you. And maybe  
you're just a little worn out in a place or two,  
and maybe you got some stains that we can't  
rub out, but you're still a fixture around here,  
and you're still the first place we go to when  
we want to feel at home.*

*Player 2: Aw, come here and give your lazy, old uncle a  
hug, huh? Come on, we'll sit and rest a bit.*

After experimenting with the exercises in this section, practice incorporating them into long, Substantial Scene work and complete plays. Patient character development is a great way to extend the action.



# Creating Environments

**In a full-length, improvised play**, a well-created environment can be a wonderful gift to the improviser. More than just providing a location, the environment can help develop the story. It can serve as a catalyst for the action, affect the relationships between the characters, and offer a symbol or a metaphor to feed the play's theme.

In fact, in a full-length play, the environment not only can do those things but it also absolutely must. The world of the drama has no room for the arbitrary. Everything presented to the audience, great or trivial, must have significance in the context of the whole. If we choose to present our characters in a certain location and at a certain time, then that location and that time must be absolutely essential to the story. Indeed, it should be impossible for that exact story to unfold in any other place imaginable.

An all too common occurrence in improvisation is for a scene to take place regardless of its environment rather than because of its environment. For example, a husband and wife are in an ice-cream shop and a handsome, young man walks in, catching the wife's attention. The husband starts feeling insecure and jealous, and the wife becomes annoyed. They squabble, and the husband walks out, leaving the wife to take a second look at the handsome, young man.

This could be an interesting scene, but notice how independent it is of the environment. Rather than taking place in an ice-cream shop, it could have just as easily been set in an elegant restaurant, the deck of a cruise ship, or a park bench on a Sunday afternoon. It happened regardless of the fact that it was in an ice-cream shop and not because of it. Now, this might be okay for a short scene in a short-form improv show, but in a full-length play, the environment must be necessary and not just possible. Otherwise, it simply will not be substantial enough to support two hours' worth of stage time.

Think again about the couple in the ice-cream shop and imagine if the scene unfolded differently. The wife rushes in, followed by her husband. He's tired, and she's pregnant. It's 11:30 P.M., and she's having a craving for Chocolate Triple Fudge, and until she gets it there will not be any peace between them. The clerk, however, is very sorry, but they just ran out of Chocolate Triple Fudge and can she offer her some Rocky Road Deluxe? The wife becomes insanely furious at the notion that Rocky Road Deluxe can in any way be considered a substitute for Chocolate Triple Fudge and berates the husband for his inability to provide even the barest of necessities for her and her child. The two begin to squabble until finally the wife breaks down in apologetic tears and confesses that she is absolutely terrified of becoming a mother and riddled with insecurities. The husband assures her that they are in this together, and the two reconcile. Suddenly, the clerk discovers a whole, unopened tin of Chocolate Triple Fudge. However, the wife is now in need of a pastrami sandwich, and she runs outside pulling her husband behind her.

Notice how, now, the scene could not take place in any other location in the world aside from an ice-cream shop. It simply wouldn't make sense for a woman in desperate need of Chocolate

Triple Fudge to go anywhere else. Furthermore, not only was the scene in need of its location but also the scene was caused by its location. The fact that this particular ice-cream shop did not have any Chocolate Triple Fudge was what propelled the wife into hysterics and launched her emotional journey.

## **Establishing the Environment**

The goal, then, is to create an environment without which your play could never exist. To marry the plot and the place so closely that one would be meaningless without the other. Here, then, are some various ways in which you might approach the task.

### **NAME IT!**

Before the environment can become an integral part of the play, there must be no mistake about what it is. Where and when does the action take place? Assuming that the improvisers are working on a bare stage, in the typical “black void” with perhaps a few generic set pieces and a couple of those ubiquitous black, wooden cubes, the only way to unmistakably establish the environment is to have the characters identify it, verbally, in the course of their dialogue. This needs to be done within the first five minutes of a full-length play, and the sooner the better. If your play is going to change locations from scene to scene, then it needs to be done at the top of every scene.

Otherwise, you risk disastrous confusion, not only on the part of the audience but also among the improvisers themselves. Nothing is tougher to recover from than a fifteen-minute scene in which everybody thought they were someplace else. A simple line such as, “Wow, the living room looks great,” or “I’ve never been in a real bank vault before,” is at least enough to make it clear from the outset where the action takes place.

## DESCRIBE IT!

Naming the environment, however, is just the beginning. It is a common trap for improvisers to assume that the audience “sees” the environment as clearly as they do. But, they don’t. While the improviser in the scene might see that elaborate Las Vegas casino, with mirrored walls, flashing lights, thick red carpeting, rows and rows of flashing slot machines, and hundreds of people milling about, the audience sees an empty stage with a few generic set pieces and a couple of those ubiquitous black, wooden cubes.

Even if the characters very properly announce that they are in a casino, the audience will, after a couple of minutes, very clearly see an empty stage with a few generic set pieces and a couple of those ubiquitous black, wooden cubes. It is up to the improviser to create the casino for the audience, and descriptive language is the only tool available. The skill is incorporating the descriptive material into the natural dialogue of the characters.

### ***Exercise #27: Tell Me about It!***

Player 1 and player 2 improvise a scene in which each line of dialogue must add to the description of the environment:

*Player 1: Wow, I bet nobody’s been in this attic for years.*

*Player 2: The dust must be three inches thick.*

*Player 1: The light switch is over there, by the old trunk.*

*Player 2: I can barely get to it; there are so many boxes in the way.*

*Player 1: Ooh, there’s my old microscope! I used to love this thing.*

*Player 2: It’s freezing up here. So, this was your bedroom?*

*Player 1: Yeah, it was cool. I was the only kid with a skylight in his bedroom.*

*Player 2: Well, after we're married, we'll buy a great, big house, and we'll put a great, big skylight in the bedroom just for you. And, we can even put up all of this tacky, brown wall paneling from the 1970s.*

*Player 1: Hey, Mom and I put this up by ourselves. That's why none of the panels actually touch, and you can see all the plasterboard behind them.*

### **USE IT!**

Nothing helps to create an environment as much as filling it up with objects and furniture through the use of pantomime. Few things are more magical to watch than several different characters open up the same drawer, in the same nightstand, or play the same piano, or flip the same light switch, throughout the course of the play. While pantomime is a highly specialized skill that does not come easily (especially when an entire troupe of actors is trying to create the same physical reality) it is not impossible to gain a basic enough competency with pantomime, or what Viola Spolin called “space-object work,” in order for it to be highly effective.

### **Justifying the Environment**

While naming, describing, and using the environment will establish it clearly, it will not necessarily justify it. Again, it is not enough for the environment in a full-length play to be possible, it must be necessary. It must be at least partly responsible for causing the play to take place.

### **AS A CATALYST FOR THE ACTION**

By endowing the environment with attributes that affect the characters, it can easily become a catalyst for the action. For

example, if the environment is oppressively hot, it might cause the characters to become easily irritated and lead to an argument that would not, under other circumstances, have taken place. Or, if there's an unrelenting thunder and lightning storm outside and the characters are trapped inside, they might be led to an intimacy that would not have otherwise developed. Or, if the environment had a spider in it and one of the characters suffered from arachnophobia, the character's behavior would be in direct response to the environment. In each of the cases above, the environment causes the action.

***Exercise # 28: Is It Hot in Here, or Is It Just Me?***

Prepare by writing environmental attributes (such as extremely hot, isolated, being bugged by the FBI, etc.) on slips of paper. Player 1 and player 2 choose a slip of paper at random and improvise a scene in which the chosen environmental attribute affects the characters and serves as a catalyst for the action.

**A TIP FOR SUCCESS:**

*Try to talk about the environmental attribute as little as possible. Rather, allow its influence to affect the relationship on stage by affecting the behavior and the emotions of the characters.*

**AS IT EFFECTS THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN THE CHARACTERS**

By creating an environment that is of special significance to the characters, it can easily stir the relationship between them and add fuel for the drama. For example, a scene between two adult sisters will be different if it is set in the lobby of a hotel than if it is set in the bedroom that they shared as children for thirteen years. The personal and emotional connections with their childhood

bedroom are far more likely to tap into the inner core of their relationship and provoke a dramatic scene. It's very helpful, therefore, if several of the characters have a deep emotional connection to the environment.

## **AS A METAPHOR**

We have already spoken about using the environment as a symbol for its primary inhabitant or as a foil for a visitor. Certainly, using the environment as a symbol or a foil for one of the characters will justify its presence.

Another way to make a thematic use of the environment is to use it as a metaphor for life. For example, if a play is set in a circus, the circus might be cast as a metaphor for life, suggesting that life is full of the ridiculous and inexplicable, and all that we can do is strive to keep our balance on the tightrope of sanity. Or, if a play is set in a lush garden, the garden might be cast as a metaphor for life, suggesting that life can be endlessly bountiful for those who work hard to make it so.

It is actually quite easy to accomplish this. It only takes a character to notice the metaphor and to explain it out loud. "You know, this old circus is a lot like life . . ." Of course, the more the action has been dependent upon the environment, the more the metaphor will resonate with truth.

### ***Exercise #29: Life Is Like a Metaphor***

Standing in a circle, player 1 announces an environment and player 2 explains how that environment is just like life. Then player 2 announces an environment and player 3 creates the metaphor. It goes around the circle until everyone has had a turn:

*Player 1: A tree house.*

*Player 2: Life is a tree house. You put it together with whatever you can find, and you hope the wind*

*doesn't blow it down before you've had enough time to play in it. A gym.*

*Player 3: Life is like a gym. The harder you work, the stronger you get. A ballroom.*

*Player 4: Life is a ballroom. Sooner or later, the music has to stop. (Etc.)*

Again, return to long, Substantial Scene work and complete plays, incorporating the work from the above exercises.

# Putting It Together

**We have taken a look** at the following:

- Cause and Effect Storytelling
- Raising the Dramatic Stakes
- The dramatic structure of a full-length play
- The dramatic flow of a Substantial Scene
- Creating characters
- Creating an environment

And, mixed in with our look at characters and environment, we touched on ways to use theatrical symbols and metaphors in order to feed the theme. Let's take one more walk through the Play by Play Structural Map, and I'll offer some final thoughts about putting it all together.

## **A Final Look at The Foundation**

Nothing is more important at the top of The Foundation than good, solid improvisation. Be spontaneous! Trust your first idea and act on it. Always make your partner look good. Focus on your partner, discover what she needs to be successful, and provide it. Always say, "Yes!" Gladly embrace your partner's idea and build upon it.

If the top of the show starts off with a barrage of blocked offers and negative offers, in which the characters are made to

look bad, wrong, and stupid, then the play is in trouble. Odds are, the first scene will devolve into an argument and nothing of any substance will be created, no environment, no real characters, and no relationship. Plus, the argument itself will quickly become annoying to the audience, as it will very obviously be two improvisers trying to score points by showing how wittily they can insult the other rather than two characters building *The Foundation* of a two-hour play. The audience might not be able to articulate the difference, but they will certainly be able to feel it. At the top of the show, stay positive and always, always, always make your partners look good.

The next thing to do is relax. There's no need to rush. You've got plenty of time. Ease into it and allow the improvisation to develop naturally. Connect with your partner. Allow the dialogue to unfold at a natural pace, rather than feeling that "improv anxiety" that prompts us to talk really fast and dump a bunch of offers on the stage before the lights come down on our brilliant scene. Relax. Pace yourself. The lights are staying up.

Spend some time creating the environment. Name it, describe it, and use it. Connect it to the characters on stage through symbolism and metaphor. Be affected by it, and allow it to affect the relationship on stage. Spend some time developing your character and your partner's character through endowments, monologues, and reminiscences. Five, ten, even fifteen minutes can be spent just inhabiting the environment and introducing the audience to the first three or four characters.

Now, does that mean that fifteen, ten, or even five minutes will go by without any action unfolding? No, because inhabiting the environment and introducing the characters do not take place in a dramatic vacuum. They take place in the context of substantial dramatic scenes. For example, imagine an opening fifteen-minute scene in which a mountain cabin is created, a husband and wife are introduced, and

their characters and relationship are developed. Surely if the two improvisers simply call each other “honey” and then go on to describe the cabin for fifteen minutes, we’re in for a hell of an evening.

However, if the scene is one of Dramatic Conflict in which the husband’s objective is to extend their fabulous weekend for another two days and the wife’s objective is to leave that evening because she has to be at work the very next morning; the cabin is described alternately by the husband and wife, his descriptions pointing out the positive as a tactic to make his wife want to stay, and her descriptions pointing out the inconveniences as a tactic to make her husband want to leave; and the isolated nature of the cabin becomes a metaphor for the husband’s feelings of isolation within the marriage ever since his wife was promoted to senior vice president, until finally the wife reluctantly agrees to stay as long as she can just pop into town for a few hours and check her e-mail, then suddenly, we’d be pretty excited about the rest of the show.

Once you’ve relaxed and your environment, your first couple of characters, and your first Substantial Scene have all been well established and set in motion, it’s time to focus on creating the routine. Lines that reference the past are a good way to do this. For example, to stay with our husband and wife from above, lines from the husband such as:

“Come on, Honey, we haven’t had a vacation in years.”

“Ever since you’ve been promoted, it’s been hard to find time together.”

“We used to be so spontaneous.”

and lines from the wife such as:

“Honey, I’m sorry, but work has been crazy the past couple of months.”

“To be honest, my second quarter wasn’t very good, and I’m under a lot of pressure.”

“I told you that things would be different if I took the promotion.”

are all effective ways of beginning to establish the routine. In this case, the routine has to do with a husband and wife whose individual needs are beginning to cause a strain in their relationship.

Notice how this type of exposition needn't be clunky if it is incorporated skillfully into the dialogue. The lines above, while expository in nature, are also being used as tactics by the characters to achieve their objectives; the husband is trying to convince the wife to stay, and the wife is trying to convince the husband to leave. By “hiding” your exposition in active dialogue, you avoid the tedium of calling the action to a halt and delivering an “obligatory” monologue of exposition.

In addition to referencing the past, another effective tool for establishing the routine is identifying patterns in the characters' behavior. Lines from the husband such as:

“Sweetie, you worry too much.”

“You always give more to that company than they ever give you in return.”

“Every time we try to do something, your cell phone rings.”

and lines from the wife such as:

“You tend to think about today, and I tend to think about tomorrow.”

“Nothing ever seems to bother you.”

“You take off work whenever you feel like it; I don't feel comfortable with that.”

are great ways of identifying the routine. And, as an extra bonus, each line offers a character endowment as well.

So far, we've discussed referencing the past and identifying patterns. However, it's important to remember that the routine of *The Foundation* does not exist solely in the past. It exists in the present moment. It is where we meet the characters. It is not enough to explain the routine; *The Foundation* must demonstrate, reinforce, and advance the routine through an active series of Cause and Effect events and dramatic Substantial Scenes. When the characters in *The Foundation* do nothing but explain the routine, the play begins to stagnate for want of dramatic action. Notice how our husband and wife are not just sitting around discussing their marital problems; rather, they are engaged in a Substantial Scene in which one is trying to leave and the other is trying to convince her to stay.

Now, while that's the right kind of start, we certainly don't want to see them wrestle with this single issue for forty-five minutes. This is the part where an improviser might become afraid to make a bold choice for fear of breaking the routine and ending *The Foundation* prematurely. For example, the wife might be tempted to end the scene by becoming angry with the husband and leaving him behind as she goes home. However, the improviser might shrink from that choice because she has identified the routine as the debate about staying or leaving. To leave, then, would end the debate and break the routine. But, this is not so, and allow me to illustrate why.

To once again make use of our Story Spine exercise, the routine in this case can be summarized as follows:

Once upon a time, there was a husband and wife who were experiencing a strain in their relationship because of a conflict between his need to spend more time with her and her need to meet the demands of a challenging career. Every day, they tried to find ways of spending time together, but the demands of her job would inevitably interfere.

If, at the end of the first scene, the wife went home and the husband remained behind, then, far from breaking the routine of her job interfering with their efforts to spend time together, her choice would significantly strengthen the routine. The drama would take off, the audience would be hooked, and we would still be soundly rooted in *The Foundation*.

A final idea to think about, regarding Foundations, is a concept that I call “Loading The Foundation.” We know that the main purpose of *The Foundation* is to create a routine that is going to be broken by The First Significant Event. To load The Foundation is to make offers that will make a potential First Significant Event obvious and easy.

For example, let’s say that our wife decided to stay at the cabin for an extra two days but absolutely had to go to town and check her e-mails. The husband was content but still a bit annoyed that she couldn’t put her work completely out of her mind for a couple of days. So, the wife goes off to town and the husband is left alone. As his boredom causes his annoyance to increase, the door to the cabin opens and in bursts Shelia, a young woman who is staying in another cabin about three miles away. Sheila was out on a hike and got lost. The husband invites her in and, as the two get acquainted, it becomes clear that Sheila is everything he wishes his wife to be: spontaneous, carefree, and blissfully in the present moment at all times. There is an obvious attraction between the husband and Sheila.

The character of Sheila, of course, is a foil for the character of the wife. By entering the play, she is loading The Foundation by making a potential First Significant Event involving the husband’s attraction for her obvious and easy. Perhaps he can have an affair with her. Perhaps the contrast with his wife will inspire him to tell his wife that he wants a divorce. Those things don’t have to happen, but by continuously loading The Foundation, you present a number of options for things that can happen. Then, when it’s

time for The First Significant Event, it's a simple matter of acting upon the easiest and most obvious of the choices.

To further load The Foundation, in this case, the wife can return after Shelia exits and tell her husband that an e-mail from her boss has instructed her to attend an important client meeting on Monday, and she can't extend the weekend after all. This, piled on top of the husband's attraction for Sheila, brings us even closer to a point of critical mass and to an imminent and obvious First Significant Event. It's like adding playing cards, one by one, to a house of cards. The tension mounts as the house becomes increasingly unstable and, at last, collapses.

### ***Exercise #30: Loading The Foundation***

By using the first two lines of the Story Spine, we can practice loading The Foundation. The first offer introduces The Foundation, and the second offer loads it:

*Player 1: Once upon a time, there was a lady named Blanch who was experiencing significant financial difficulties.*

*Player 2: Every day, she went to work as a teller in a bank.*

*Player 1: Once upon a time, there was a pilot who flew a plane for a major American airline.*

*Player 2: Every day, she moonlighted at three different jobs in order to make ends meet and, as a result, got very little sleep.*

*Player 1: Once upon a time, there was a fifty-year-old college professor who was having a mid-life crisis.*

*Player 2: Every day, he met with his beautiful, twenty-four-year-old teacher's assistant.*

## **A Final Look at The First Significant Event**

The First Significant Event is that final playing card that causes the card house to collapse. It should spring with ease from a well-loaded Foundation. Sometimes it will be introduced deliberately. An improviser will feel that The Foundation has fulfilled its purpose and will choose to end it by boldly identifying a character #2 and committing The First Significant Event. More often than not, that's the way it should be.

However, this is improvisation, and such things are not always in our control. Sometimes, The First Significant Event will happen and the play will move into The Foundation Focus before the improvisers are fully aware of it. The task, then, is to realize what has happened and shift accordingly.

The tricky thing is making sure that everyone in the play has identified the same First Significant Event. If offstage communication is possible, there is nothing wrong with grabbing another cast member and confirming your suspicions with each other. Another way to give the cast the best odds of clearly identifying The First Significant Event is to simply decide that it will not take place before a certain number of minutes have passed. When Freestyle Repertory Theater first started performing *Play by Play*, we had one of those black, glow-in-the-dark photographer's clocks at the foot of the stage. We agreed that The First Significant Event would take place between twenty and twenty-five minutes into the first act. Anything that happened before that, regardless of how shockingly routine breaking it was, simply didn't qualify. Another option is to set in advance who will be character #1 and who will be character #2. That way, everyone will know that if #1 didn't do it to #2, it wasn't The First Significant Event.

## **A Final Look at The Foundation Focus**

It's all about raising the stakes of The First Significant Event. So, character #1 proposes marriage to character #2. The Foundation

Focus is all about the trouble character #1 has caused by making the proposal, the danger character #2 risks by either accepting or rejecting the proposal, and the dire consequences for all should the couple ever wed.

Character #1 confides a deeply personal secret to character #2. The Foundation Focus is all about the risk character #1 faces should character #2 disclose the secret, the danger character #1 encounters after character #2 does disclose the secret, and the dire consequences to all now that the secret has been revealed.

Character #1 loans a significant amount of money to character #2. The Foundation Focus is all about the trouble character #1 is in when his wife finds out about the loan, the sudden need for the money that arises within character #1's family, and the dire consequences to all once character #2 admits that he gambled it all away and can never pay it back.

Be sure that The Foundation Focus is active and does not get caught in a state of potentiality. If character #2 faces danger by accepting the marriage proposal, don't allow the play to dwell in that state of potential danger. Have character #2 accept the marriage proposal and get herself into danger. Notice how in "The Personal Secret," character #2 raises the stakes by actually disclosing the secret, and in "The Significant Loan," character #2 raises the stakes by actually losing the money.

In addition to raising the stakes of The First Significant Event, The Foundation Focus must give birth to The First Significant Repercussion in the same way that The Foundation gives birth to The First Significant Event. It should arrange events so that The First Significant Repercussion is easy, obvious, and natural. It's important, now, to understand your role in the play. If you are not character #1 or character #2, then your job in The Foundation Focus is to help draw attention to the people who are. It takes a certain maturity, here, to step back and realize that the play is not

about you. Rather than make offers that focus on your own character, you need to make offers that focus on the main characters. Every offer made in The Foundation Focus should serve to raise the stakes of The First Significant Event and bring character #1 and character #2 closer to The First Significant Repercussion. Remember, only the two central characters can bring about The First Significant Repercussion. Don't try to help by thinking, "What can I do?" Try to help by thinking, "How can I get them on stage together at the right time?"

### **A Final Look at The First Significant Repercussion**

In a two-act play, The First Significant Repercussion should end act one. If anything, a few more minutes of action or dialogue might be necessary to bring the act to a close and allow the full weight of the repercussion to resonate with the audience before the lights come down; but that's about it. By raising The Question of the Play, The First Significant Repercussion provides the perfect moment of drama and suspense to pause the action and to send the audience into intermission.

The trick, of course, is making sure that everybody knows it when it happens. Again, you can go by the clock and decide that it simply has to happen within a certain ten-minute window of time, approximately fifty to sixty minutes into the show. Another way to help, if you find it makes things easier, is to let characters #1 and #2 have the stage to themselves during the last five minutes of the act. That will serve as a signal to everybody, indicating that the Repercussion is about to take place.

While it is everybody's job in The Foundation Focus to make offers that set the stage for The First Significant Repercussion, it is up to character #2 to close the deal. Ultimately it is #2's responsibility to find #1, get them both on stage together, and clearly and decisively do the deed.

## **A Final Look at The Question of the Play**

Since The Question of the Play is not necessarily said out loud, it is important that everyone in the cast agrees on the same question. If everyone in the cast has a different interpretation of the events in act one, and a different articulation of The Question of the Play, then everyone will be working at cross purposes throughout all of act two.

With Freestyle Repertory Theater, we spent the intermission identifying the important facts: Who's character #1, who's character #2, what was The First Significant Event, what was The First Significant Repercussion, and what was The Question of the Play. I strongly recommend this, as it is very easy for five different improvisers to have five different answers to all of those questions. If there is more than one valid interpretation and the group is having trouble achieving consensus, then the director of the show needs to make the decision and the rest of the cast needs to get on board.

I also strongly recommend that you avoid the temptation to suggest what might happen in act two. It's important to approach act two with all of the spontaneity and freedom with which you approached act one. Too many ideas about what might happen tend to stifle and burden the cast.

## **A Final Look at The Foundation Funnel**

Once The Question of the Play has been raised, it's time for the characters to decide whether they want the answer to be yes or no. The Foundation Funnel is spent in pursuit of the desired outcome. While The Question of the Play concerns itself solely with characters #1 and #2, it is important that the answer to The Question be of vital importance to every single character in the play. The stakes must be incredibly high for everyone involved. That way, when a "yes" and a "no" meet, their passionate, urgent, and mutually

exclusive needs will necessarily result in a compelling Dramatic Conflict. This is where strong objectives and a knack for tactics are essential. Also, any character that is not deeply invested in the outcome of The Question will have no dramatic connection to the story and, consequently, be of little interest to the audience.

As I've mentioned before, the exceptions to this are those characters that are not aware that The Question exists. Obviously they can't be invested in the answer if they don't even know there's a question. However, they can affect the answer, nonetheless, and that is where the fun comes in. Characters that are oblivious to The Question can profoundly affect the answer by coincidence, by unknowingly affecting the sequence of events in the pursuit of something entirely unrelated.

For example, let's imagine that The Question of the Play is, "Will the master thief succeed in stealing the diamonds from the lady of the house?" Ten minutes into The Foundation Funnel, the master thief arrives at the mansion disguised as a famous art dealer. Alone in the drawing room, he cracks the safe and removes the diamonds. (He pushes the answer toward yes.) However, the lady of the house is heard approaching, and he quickly stashes the diamonds in a nearby vase. (He reluctantly nudges the answer toward no.) At that moment, the housekeeper enters and, muttering something about that old vase being ready for the trash, picks the vase up and carries it away. The housekeeper has pushed the answer precariously close to no, although she doesn't even know about The Question. These types of characters are a delight to the audience and a great deal of fun for the improviser as they can bumble and blunder their way through the plot, while having the most devastating of effects on the hapless main characters.

It's very helpful in The Foundation Funnel for character #1 to interact with as much of the cast as possible. This is because The

Foundation Funnel must result in The Climax, and The Climax must take place between character #1 and character #3. Each time character #1 interacts with someone other than character #2, a potential Climax opportunity is created. While character #1 has to commit The Climax, the improviser who plays character #1 need not be unduly burdened with the weight of the entire task. If the improviser is overly concerned with discovering a character #3 and creating an effective Climax, it can cause an intellectual preoccupation that can impede spontaneity. To avoid this, everyone is responsible for making character #1 look good by creating as many potential Climax opportunities as possible.

This is one portion of the show where it is easy to become too caught up in the structure. By concerning yourself too much with trying to “figure out” a great Climax, you are almost guaranteed to start planning the future and to lose your spontaneity. Instead, just concern yourself with achieving your immediate objective, answering The Question either yes or no. If everybody focuses on achieving that objective, then, sooner or later, character #1 will do something to somebody that will prove to be The Climax.

Remember, again, that it isn't really the burden of the improviser portraying character #1 to make a Climax. It is everybody's burden to ensure that a Climax happens. For example, player 1, as an indigent character #1, might sit on a bench next to a stranger with no intention of making that The Climax. However, player 2, as the stranger, might make it The Climax by “overaccepting” the offer, perhaps by recognizing character #1 as his long lost, elder brother and informing him that he is really the heir to a family fortune, thus allowing character #1 to marry character #2. The stranger becomes character #3, and it was player 2 who made it happen. Again, it all boils down to good, old-fashioned improvisation; focus on your partner and overaccept her offers.

Extremely important in The Foundation Funnel is allowing your character to change. That is, allow your character to switch sides from yes to no or from no to yes. Allow your character to be convinced, or fooled, or persuaded, or bullied, or blinded by love, or brought into the light, or anything that allows her to shift allegiances and alter the balance of power between the yes's and the no's. Of course, not everybody has to do this, but unless somebody does it, the drama will hit an impasse and not be able to move forward. Besides, it is just this type of change, after playing a scene with character #1, that creates a character #3.

### **A Final Look at The Climax**

Once The Question of the Play has been raised and The Foundation Funnel is under way, The Climax can occur at almost anytime. In some plays, The Foundation Funnel is remarkably short. The Climax occurs shortly after the Funnel begins, and the rest of the play is spent in The Foundation Finale as the consequences of The Climax slowly take their toll upon the characters. In other plays, The Foundation Funnel is remarkably long, lasting up until moments before the final curtain, layering plot twist upon plot twist upon plot twist, only to slam The Climax in at the last conceivable minute and bring the play to a screeching halt.

As Bernard Grebanier astutely observes in his book, *Playwriting: How to Write for the Theater*, plays that tend to use one-dimensional characters in order to focus on the complexities of the plot, such as farces and melodramas, tend to have Climaxes very close to the end of the story. The reason for this is that those types of plays can only go on for as long as the plot can continue to twist. As soon as The Climax sets the plot upon a path toward resolution, and all of the confusions and complications are explained away, the fun is over and the play needs to end. On the other hand, plays that use three-dimensional characters and focus

less on the inventiveness of the plot, such as dramas and tragedies, tend to demand earlier dramatic Climaxes and longer resolutions, allowing more time for the characters to process the emotional impact of the ending and experience a more believable emotional journey. In classical tragedies, the dramatic irony is often the result of an early Climax, which allows the main character to struggle vainly on in the pursuit of success, while piteously blind to the fact that he has already, and long ago, cemented his doom.

### **A Final Look at The Foundation Finale**

This is where it all comes together, and the play is brought to a close. Obviously, the most important requirement of The Foundation Finale is that The Question of the Play is finally answered, in no uncertain terms, either yes or no. Also important, is that any loose ends, regarding any other characters, are resolved. You just don't want the audience leaving with the thought, "But, what about the daughter? Didn't she say something about eloping?"

Keep in mind that The Foundation Finale can be fairly long, and there is still a lot of room for improvisation. It's a trap to think that your beautifully executed Climax has made the outcome so perfectly obvious to you, the cast, the audience, and the world, that you may now engage your autopilot and catch a few winks as you cruise into the curtain call. For one thing, remember that The Climax needn't answer The Question as your character expects. It's perfectly legitimate, and often quite wonderful, when The Climax backfires and achieves the opposite of its intended result. This can throw the improviser who has very neatly written the last fifteen minutes of the play. It's also quite possible that your beautifully executed Climax turns out not to be The Climax at all, beautiful or otherwise. Stay spontaneous. Stay open. Keep alert. See what's really happening, and stay in the game. Even now, at the very end, it's all about improvisation: Be spontaneous, always make your partner look good, and always say, "Yes!"



# Conclusion

**Improvising a full-length play** is hard. It should be! But, it's also very, very possible and very, very amazing. Here are some things you can do to help achieve the goal more quickly and with greater results:

## **Practice!**

Practice, practice, practice! It's the only way to turn your intellectual understanding of the concepts into an instinctive ability on stage. It's a lot like playing chess. You can learn the rules in a matter of minutes, but the only way to master the game is to play a lot of chess.

## **Read Plays**

Reading plays is a great way to see how the concepts in this book are actually put to use. Make an exercise out of analyzing the plays for their dramatic structure. Try to identify the various parts of the Play by Play Structural Map. Track the flow of the Substantial Scenes. See how the playwright develops the characters and how the environment is connected to the story. Find the metaphors and figure out the symbolism.

## **Go to the Theater**

Reading plays is an essential habit, but actually going to the theater is even more important. Remember, a written play is not the complete work of art. It's only when the play is performed on

stage, with the artistic contributions of the actors, director, lighting designer, set designer, and sound designer, that the playwright's vision may truly be realized. Seeing plays reminds us of the full potential of live theater and inspires us to raise the bar of our improvisation.

## **Play Scenes**

Choose some fabulous plays and read the scenes out loud as a part of your rehearsal process. If time permits, memorize, rehearse, and perform them for one another. This is an excellent way to become familiar with the natural pacing of events and dialogue in a full-length play. It's also great to find well-written scenes that exemplify whatever skill you are focusing on and to use those scenes as models for your improvisation.

Laura Livingston used this technique extensively when directing Freestyle Repertory Theater's *Doin' it in Style*. In this show, we improvised full-length plays in the style of various playwrights. Laura discovered that Shakespeare is particularly good at describing environments and endowing offstage characters; Tennessee Williams is great for using objects as symbols for his characters; and Anton Chekhov is terrific at using his environment as a catalyst for dramatic action. Our improvisation was never better than it was after reading and discussing the work of these master playwrights. I should mention, quite clearly, that several of the character and environment exercises in this book were created by Laura as rehearsal techniques for *Doin' it in Style*.

## **Study Acting, Directing, and Playwriting**

Improvisation is a difficult and sophisticated form of art. Not only does it have its own set of skills that needs to be practiced and mastered but it also demands that each performer be an actor, director, and playwright. We portray the characters, don't we? We create

the stage movement and stage pictures, don't we? We write the dialogue, don't we? Of course, we do. Wouldn't it be wise of us to study those disciplines and develop our skills to the best of our ability? Of course, it would.

### **Work with Me, and Let Me Help!**

Call me! Write to me! I would love to work with you. I can travel anywhere to offer classes, workshops, and custom-designed training programs through my San Francisco-based theater company, Synergy Theater. I can even work with your group to help conceive and direct an original show. I'd be eager to talk with you about how we can work together to help your group achieve its artistic goals and make a lasting and significant contribution to the vibrant world of improvisation.

Please feel free to contact me at [kenn@synergy-theater.com](mailto:kenn@synergy-theater.com) and to learn more about my current classes, performances, and activities by visiting my Web site at [www.synergy-theater.com](http://www.synergy-theater.com).

Okay, that's it. Go have fun and make great theater.



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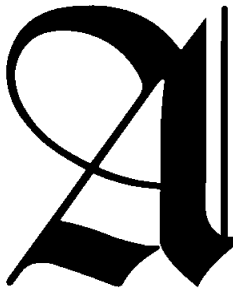
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