

Acting Out Your Faith

The Righteous Insanity Acting Workshop

Created and Compiled by
John Cosper

www.righteousinsanity.com

Introduction

From the late nineties through the mid 2000's, I had the privilege of traveling the country teaching drama ministry workshops in churches and at youth conferences. I taught a wide range of topics, from general drama ministry to script writing, but the bulk of the teaching was focused on acting, specifically getting untrained actors from your church to do more than just recite lines on stage.

This is not the work of a classically trained theater artist. It's not even the work of a theater major. What you'll find in this book is a tried, tested, refined series of activities designed to build confidence and trust in your acting troupe. This workshop and the exercises contained within have inspired and encouraged teens, adults, and children. They won't turn your actors into Johnny Depp (at least I don't think so), but they will bring the shy ones out of their shell and give everyone a better sense of what they're doing on stage.

I've arranged this book the way my workshop was arranged, in a logical series of steps that take them from playing games to thinking critically about scripts. I've also included a pair of spiritual applications that you can present along side the acting concepts being taught. You'd be amazed how many spiritual lessons can come out of simply playing acting games. Feel free to add your own to the mix.

You can break this material up into a series of one hour workshops, or go through the entire workshop in a full day (or longer). Or you can do as I did many times and cut out all but the core ideas and squash it all down to an hour or two.

I'm hopeful you'll find this book easy to use and self-explanatory, but if have any questions, please feel free to email me at john@righteousinsanity.com. Answers and advice are as free as this book, so don't be afraid to send in your questions. You might even help me improve this book and this workshop for future revisions.

Enough exposition already. On with the workshop!

Let's Play a Game

The fastest and easiest way to get your potential actors loosened up is by playing a group game. The ideal game is one that everyone can play at the same time that doesn't require speaking out - something to get them comfortable and laughing and communicating. The game I always used is called "Kitty in the Corner."

I first saw this game used in a workshop given by a teacher from Second City Chicago. I can't remember the teacher's name, or I'd give credit. Here's how you play.

1. Have the group stand and form a large circle on stage or in a room.
2. Step into the center of the circle. You will begin the game as "It."
3. The person who is "it" begins the game by walking up to someone in the circle, pointing at them, and saying, "Kitty in the corner." That person will point to someone else in the circle and say, "Next door neighbor."
4. "It" walks to the "next door neighbor," points, and says, "Kitty in the corner." That person will then point to another person in the circle and say, "Next door neighbor."

When teaching the game, begin with just these instructions, going around the circle saying, "Kitty in the corner," and getting the response, "Next door neighbor." After several stops around the circle, introduce the next part of the rules.

5. As "It" moves around the circle, the people in the circle will attempt to swap places with someone else in the circle without getting caught. To do this, the people in the circle must rely on eye contact and other non-verbal communication with their fellow players.
6. The goal for the people in the circle is to swap places with one another.
7. The goal for the person who is "It" is to try and steal one of the open spaces in the circle before the people can swap places. As soon as "It" senses someone is moving, he or she should attempt to jump into one of the open spaces before the person moving to that spot can get there.
8. If the people swapping places make it to one another's spots successfully, "It" will continue going around the circle, following the directions to the "next door neighbors" and attempting to steal someone else's spot.
9. If "It" manages to get into an empty spot in the circle before the person moving to it can get there, that person becomes "It" and the game begins anew.
10. You cannot swap with the person on your left or right. That's too easy.

I've sometimes found it helpful to do a demonstration of how to swap places for the players so they get what I am trying to tell them to do. All in all, this is a pretty simple game to teach, and once you get it rolling, everyone has a great time. It's a self-perpetuating game that can last five minutes or much longer. It's also a great game for youth groups and other groups of non-actors.

Acting Is a Game, Too

There's a dual purpose to beginning the acting workshop with a game like "Kitty in the Corner." Not only do you get people warmed up and break the ice, you've taught them the first concept they're going to learn:

Acting is a game.

Ask the group to tell you the rules of Kitty in the Corner, or choose another game and ask them to list the rules. Focus in on the roles that people play within the game (being in the circle or being "It") and the rules/directions of the game.

Just like "Kitty in the Corner," acting is a game. When you act on stage, you take on a role (a character), and you follow a script (directions). You may also want to point out to your actors that the games acted out on stage are called "plays."

There's a lot more to acting on stage than simply taking on a character's name and following the directions in a script. But before we get there, we're going to look at a different type of acting that is a game all in itself: improvisation.

The Rules of Improv

Improvisation is not just a vehicle for teaching acting. It's a valuable skill your actors will need on stage. When things go wrong - and they will - it's up to the actors to cover and keep the story moving. If someone misses a cue, drops a line, or (God forbid!) there's a prop, set, or wardrobe malfunction, your actors will thank you for the hours you made them do improv because it will save the show.

Of course for some actors, improvisation is the most terrifying things in the world. The idea of being up on stage with no script, no direction is an intimidating prospect to those who have never done it (and many who have been doing it a long time).

The truth is improvisation is impossible to mess up. Yes, anything is possible, but when you break it down to its simplest form, improv is one of the easiest "games" you'll ever play. That's because improvisation has two core rules that, if followed, will guarantee you cannot get it wrong.

The rules of improv are as follows:

1. Never say no.
2. If someone says, "No," do it anyway.

Rule 1 - Never say no means that you should never contradict your acting partner. This is sometimes called the rule of agreement; actors agree that whatever their partner says goes. They agree, and they add to it.

The goal of improvisation is the same as acting with a script: to tell a story. In order for a story to happen, the actors have to work together to create a story. If an actor says, "I want to play basketball," and their co-star says, "No, I don't want to," that actor not only stalls the scene, they violate the trust their other actor has in them.

Actors performing improv must trust that their fellow actors will take their ideas and build on them. That's why you never say no.

Rule 2 - What happens when you're watching a movie and someone says, "Never go through that door?" You immediately want someone to go through that door.

Contradiction, or saying no, creates conflict. So if this does happen on stage, the way out is to do whatever you've been told not to do. The audience wants to see you open the door. Why? Because it's probably going to be funny.

The classic example I always used was from the old *Ren and Stimpy* show. There was one cartoon where Stimpy was assigned to guard a red button that could never be pressed. What did the audience want to see when they were told that Stimpy should never, ever press the button? They want to see him press the button!

Yes, there's a little more to it than that, but these two rules form the backbone of improv. So long as you stay faithful to them, you cannot mess up.

Yes, And...

Our first improv game is a very simple exercise in agreeing and adding. “Yes, And...” is a game for two actors. The rules are as follows:

1. Actors will be given the first line of the scene.
2. Every line of the scene after the first line will begin with the words, “Yes, and...” meaning you agree with what your partner said and then add to their ideas.

Choose two actors to play the game and give them an open ended opening line, such as:

- “I think we should start a circus.”
- “I think we should start a band.”
- “We should open a restaurant.”
- “We should open a store.”
- “We should make a movie.”

Let your actors go for a minute or so, then give another pair of actors a chance to play. Look for opportunities to point out where the actors are following the rules correctly and to praise their creativity in adding to the scene.

A Few More Tips on Improv

A few more pointers to share as you get into improv:

Improv is not about telling jokes. This is a big misconception about improvisation and a trap for beginning improvisers. Improv is about telling stories through acting. The humor comes out of making connections within the story, and it happens naturally when two actors are working together following the rules of improv.

Be Specific. Ask your actors, which line is funnier:

“I’m hungry for Chinese food.”
“I want some Moo Goo Gai Pan.”

The more specific and detailed you get, the funnier things become.

React, Don’t Think! Don’t think ahead. Don’t think. When it’s your turn, react to the line you’ve just heard by (a) agreeing/accepting what your partner has just said or done and (b) adding to it.

The Storyteller

Now that your actors have begun to understand the rules of improv, it's time to progress to doing what improv is meant to do: tell a story. The next step up from Yes, And..." is The Storyteller, a classic improv game you've likely seen if you've ever watched *Who's Line Is It Anyway?*

1. Choose four people and have them stand in a line on stage.
2. Give the opening sentence to a fictional story to the first actor. That actor then begins with the second sentence of the story and builds on it.
3. At the discretion of the moderator, the story is then passed to the second actor, then the third, then the fourth, with each taking a turn to build onto the story. Go down the line two or three times before wrapping up the story, or keep going if they're really on a roll... why not, right?

At this point, your actors really haven't begun to take on characters yet. The purpose of this scene is to apply the rules of improv to actually telling a story. The next improv game will take telling a story one step further by introducing characters into a storytelling game.

The Principal's Office

The Principal's Office is a storytelling game with characters. In this game, the actors will tell a story but in character.

1. Choose three actors from the group to participate. Two of the actors will be students, and the third will be the principal.
2. The two students are in trouble for something, and they've been sent to the principal's office. Decide what age the students will be and what crime they are accused of.
3. The students in the story will attempt to make up a cover story to get out of trouble. Their job is to work together to come up with an elaborate cover story while the principal attempts to catch them in a lie.

This is a versatile game that changes as you change both the ages of the students in the scene and the crime with which they are accused. Alka-Seltzer in the school pool and pranks on substitute teachers were common ideas we used. In fact, the Alka-Seltzer scenario led to one of the funniest scenes ever during a workshop.

The two students in the scene were first graders. During the scene, one of the students "found" Alka-Seltzer tablets in her pocket. She pretended to shove them in her mouth. This led to her literally foaming at the mouth while still trying to maintain the cover story and had the entire audience rolling with laughter.

I should also mention that this is one of the few scenes that people have found objectionable within the workshop. A concerned parent pulled me aside afterward and said she felt that the scene was encouraging children to tell lies. I explained to her that this was merely an acting exercise, and not any such endorsement of lying. People are often portrayed on stage telling lies, and more often than not, liars suffer some sort of consequence for their lies. We agreed to disagree on the usefulness of the exercise.

Depending on the crowd you work with, it might be worth a mention that this is just a game, and that lying is not only a sin, it's one of the Ten Commandments. Your kids (if you work with kids) no doubt already know and understand this, but for the sake of a nervous or overly-protective parent, you may still want to give a disclaimer.

The same parent also objected to this next exercise, but for a very different reason. It'll be pretty easy to guess why she hated it.

Boris

An old friend and partner in crime taught me this game, and it's one of my favorites. This time we're not only telling stories and playing characters, we're adding physical comedy to the equation - comedy that comes from obeying the rules of improv.

1. Choose two actors to participate in the scene. One actor will be an interrogator, and the other will be a person being interrogated. (They can be a cop and a crook, two spies, two hoods, etc.)
2. The third person in the scene is Boris. Boris is (usually) around seven feet tall and four hundred pounds. He is invisible, but we can see the impact of Boris's actions throughout the scene.
3. Assign the specific character types to the actors, and determine what "crime" the accused is accused of.
4. The interrogator will begin by trying to get a confession from the accused, who resists.
5. The interrogator will then introduce Boris into the scene. Boris will be used to try to coerce a confession or the truth out of the accused.
6. Boris requires very specific instructions to do his dirty work. Thus the interrogator must give specific directions for what Boris should do to the accused. "Stick your fingers in his nostrils and pick him up." "Slap him across the face." "Poke him in the eyes." "Give him a Stone Cold Stunner."
7. The scene continues until there's a confession, an admission of truth, or someone gets hurt. Hopefully not the latter.

Yes, the lady objected to the violence.

And yes, I once had to give myself a Stone Cold Stunner.

Because of the violent nature, save Boris for the older kids and the adults.

This is a twisted but very fun game to both play and watch. It's the ultimate in applying the rule of agreement because the accused must sell whatever instructions Boris has been given. There's no saying "no" here. Boris is going to strike, and either you let us see the impact Boris makes or the scene is a bust.

Roller Coaster

Roller coaster is a hilarious and fun group improv game that can also be used as an ice breaker game during a ministry event.

The game is as simple as it gets. Line about 6 chairs up on stage, one behind the other, from left to right. Select six passengers and have them sit in the seats. The group will then act as if they are going on a roller coaster ride.

Remind them that on a roller coaster, the lead car/ passenger is the first to go up, down, turn, etc. Therefore, the actors should all follow the lead of the person directly in front of them. The guy or girl in the front seat sets the tone for the whole ride.

This game is a lot of fun and another great tool for breaking those shy ones out of their shell. When everyone else is screaming, it's easier to scream on your own.

The Press Conference

The next three games are exercises that I loved teaching other groups. These are easy to start, engage the whole group, and some are self-perpetuating so you don't have to be constantly intervening. You can even get involved in some of these games yourself. We'll start with The Press Conference.

1. Select one person to be the main character in the game. Send them out of the room.
2. Select a character for the person you just sent out of the room. Decide who they are and what they have done.
3. The other actors left in the room are journalists attending a press conference for the character waiting in the other room.
4. Send in the actor from outside, but DO NOT tell them whom they are or what they have done.
5. The journalists will then ask questions to the person giving the press conference. That person will make up answers on the fly.
6. The game ends when the actor at the podium is able to guess who they are and what they have done.

The trick to this game for the audience is to ask questions that drop hints but don't give anything away. They can also give clues by their attitude toward the person at the podium. Greet people who have done a good deed with applause. Greet the evil with boos and jeers.

Car Pool

This is a game you can start and let run for as long as you like. The only limit is your imagination - and the church auditorium schedule.

1. Set four chairs on stage arranged like the front two seats and back two seats in a car.
2. Pick four actors to begin the game and have them sit.
3. Line everyone else up just off stage on the passenger side.
4. Give the actors in the car a scene to act out.
5. After about 30 seconds, the passenger in the rear passenger scene must find some way to exit the car and the scene.
6. When the passenger leaves, the actors rotate; the front passenger moves to the driver's seat. The driver moves to the rear driver's seat, and the last passenger moves to the rear passenger seat.
7. A new person sits down in the front passenger seat and starts a NEW scene. The other actors must pick up on the direction of the new scene and create all new characters in response to that cue.
8. After 30 seconds, the right rear passenger leaves the scene. Rotate and start again.

The challenge for the actors here is reacting to the new actor in the scene and taking their cue rather than doing their own thing. Some fun ideas to get you rolling are:

- Enter the car with a gun and hijack the car.
 - A family on vacation.
 - Getting lost on the way to the big concert.
 - Racing to the hospital in labor.
 - Becoming the Flintstones. Don't forget to push with your feet!
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Freeze

This is another game you can set in motion and let run. It's a great one to jump in on yourself, too.

Freeze, or Freeze Tag, begins with two actors. Put them on stage and give them characters and a situation. At any time during the scene, someone in the audience can yell, "Freeze!" and freeze the scene. When the actors on stage hear the word, they must freeze in place and hold their position.

The person who froze the scene walks on stage and replaces one of the two actors, taking their exact physical position on stage. They then unfreeze and begin a completely new scene. They cannot merely continue the scene that was already in progress. They must invent a new character and scene, and the other actor must go with whatever direction they are given by the new actor. So, for example, two characters who end up in a wrestling hold when frozen could transform into lovers in a romantic embrace when the new scene begins.

The moderator or director needs to control the action and not let the freezing get too fast and out of hand. You may want to put a 30 second timer into effect. When 30 seconds has passed in a scene, give a signal to the audience that the scene is not available for someone to freeze. In the event that multiple people yell freeze, the moderator chooses who goes and who stays.

Spiritual Lessons from Improv

Even after years of studying and practice, there are many actors who hate improv. They prefer the "safe" confines of a script because the script is predictable. When you're working from a script, you know what's coming (or is supposed to come), and you know how to respond when it comes.

Improvisation is wild, untamed, and unpredictable. And in that regard, improv is more like real life. As much as we like to think we can plan, prepare, and control our lives, it's simply not possible. Doors will be shut in our faces, disasters will strike, and plans will be shattered.

The one unchanging, immovable thing we can cling to in good times and bad is the Lord. No matter how bad it gets, the Lord is there. He loves us unconditionally. And while we have no way to control the things in this world, we can rest assured that God is ultimately in control of this world and the next.

Scripture to share:

Matthew 7:24-29 (The parable of the wise and foolish builders.)

One of the ways God meets our needs in times of trouble is through our fellow believers. As part of a drama team, you've become part of a family not only of actors, but believers who will walk and serve together. When you practice improv or rehearse for a skit or a play with other actors, you're going to form a real bond of trust. Over time, you may even find you know your fellow actors so well, you know how they think and how they're going to act.

Case in point: I traveled the country performing and teaching acting with Jamie Bratcher for three years. Near the end of that time, I spent Thanksgiving with her and her family. The two of us paired up for a game of Pictionary, and the rules of the game were that if you get one right, you get to go again. We went all the way around the board in one turn. After that, they made us split up and play with other partners.

The nature of theater is that each production, every theater troupe, becomes a community. That's one of the things that draws people to work in the theater, the opportunity to be a part of something in harmony with other people. You form a community each and every time you work on a production, and often times that community spills over off the stage. All four of the friends I invited to be groomsmen or ushers were people I met through theater or drama ministry.

As Christians, we can form not just a theater company, but a real community of

believers that love and care for one another in real life. I encourage you to build on that community intentionally through devotions, Bible study, prayer, and even service outside of your activities as a drama team. I promise you, the impact you'll make in each other's lives off stage will be far greater than the impact you'll make on stage.

Scripture to Share:

Proverbs 17:17

Surprise Scenes

Improvisation is a more natural kind of performance because everything that happens in an improvised scene is happening for the first time. Actors find it much easier to react with different emotions because they are experiencing the events in their scene in real time with no advance warning. Actors really can get stressed, scared, or otherwise emotionally involved because their instinctive brain is governing much of their behavior in the scene. (More on that later.)

These surprise scenes are tools that I've used to illustrate this similarity with real life and begin transitioning from improvisational acting to acting off scripts. They are called surprise scenes because the actors are going to be going into them with only part of the information the audience has. The audience can then observe the actors as they respond to stimuli and events they were not expecting.

The Elevator

Choose an actor to be in the scene, or maybe a few actors who will each take turns. Tell them their character is claustrophobic, and in this scene, they are going to get stuck in an elevator with another passenger. Send the actor(s) out of the room.

Choose another actor to stand on stage, a female. Tell her that her character is pregnant and when the elevator gets stuck, she should go into labor.

The reason I suggest having two or three people go through this scene is because every person's reaction to this particular scene is so radically different. I've seen a whole range of responses to this very simple scenario, from people trying to push the baby back in, to people who merely screamed through the whole scene, to one poor girl who got out of the scene by pretending to faint. Always a crowd pleaser, and a great discussion piece for exploring the choices actors make in the scene.

Strangers in a Mall

Choose a guy and a girl. Send the girl out of the room. Tell the guy he's at the mall, and he sees a girl who might be his long lost sister. Tell him to pursue her, to ask questions, and learn as much about her past as possible. Don't be shy! This is your long lost sister, and you've been looking for her for years.

Send the guy out and bring in the girl. Tell her she's at the mall, and a strange man is going to start asking a lot of questions - a man she recognizes as the

Mall Stranger from America's Most Wanted.

Send the guy in and let the fun begin. If they really get going, feel free to choose another actor and send a mall security guard into the scene - or possibly the real strangler.

Acting With Scripts

We're ready to look at our first script! The scene on the following page is a quick cut of dialogue from a movie. Give the scripts to a guy and a girl in your group and have them read through the lines silently once. Then give them the stage and allow them to interpret the lines as ready.

When the scene is over, keep the actors on stage and share this with the group:

The scene is taken from the movie *Singin' in the Rain*. As you no doubt could learn from the dialogue, these characters hate each other. These two characters also happen to be silent movie actors, and this particular scene takes place as the two actors are performing a love scene in a silent movie. The man sweeps in dramatically, runs to her side. The lady blushes. The man kneels and takes her hand. They speak in sweet, sweet tones - and they say these words.

With those directions, have the actors perform the scene once more. Afterward, discuss with them the challenge of saying such hateful, violent words while trying to act like they are in love.

A Movie Scene

MAN- Why you rattlesnake. You got that poor kid fired.

WOMAN- That's not all I'm gonna do if I ever get my hands on her.

MAN- I've never heard of anything so low. Why did you do it?

WOMAN- 'Cause you liked her. I could tell.

MAN- So that's it. Believe me, I don't like her half as much as I hate you, you reptile.

WOMAN- Sticks and stones may break my bones.

MAN- I'd like to break every bone in your body.

WOMAN- You and who else, you big lummox?

Improv vs. Acting With a Script

As I stated earlier, improvisational acting has one big thing in common with real life that acting off a script does not: in improvisation, the reactions of the actors are real because the events unfolding are happening for the very first time. Every line is spoken for the first time. Every response happens naturally because we are reacting more than we are acting.

Acting off a script is an entirely different animal. Actors must make every line, every action look like it is happening for the very first time, even though they are saying and doing things they have rehearsed dozens of times over. This does not come naturally because acting and reacting are managed by different hemispheres of the brain. The instinctual side controls our emotions and our reactions to stimuli. When something happens to make you angry, you don't have to tell yourself, "stiffen up, get red in the face, now yell." We just do it. It's the natural reaction to something that makes you angry.

Acting is an intellectual exercise that involves remembering and delivering lines and actions on cue. Acting is governed by the intellectual brain - the same part of the brain that helped you memorize the alphabet and your multiplication tables. When your character is given news that makes him angry, you not only have to remember to say the line, "I am angry," you have to make your body and voice transform in a way that conveys anger. All the things that come naturally from the instinctive brain must be re-created by the intellectual brain.

The challenge for actors, therefore, is to teach our intellectual mind how to mimic the things we do naturally with the instinctive mind: raising our voice when we are angry, crying when we are sad, jumping when we are scared or surprised.

There are two exercises that I used as tools to help actors to explore emotional and instinctive responses to stimuli: The Emotion Skit and The Numbers Game.

The Emotion Skit

The Emotion Skit (author unknown) is a pointless nonsense skit used to allow actors to isolate and explore different emotions and character traits. It's only one page script that can be memorized very quickly (although that's not necessary), and it calls for four characters.

The first time through, have the actors read the script completely flat with no emotion or inflection. Then choose ONE emotion for them to express throughout the entire skit: happy, sad, angry, afraid, etc. You can also have them take on a character type (cowboys, fashion models, etc.) or some other characteristic you want to explore.

The goal here is for the actors to take whatever emotion or trait you give them to the extreme. If you choose happy, they better be REALLY happy. If you choose sad, they better be pee in your pants/ afraid for your life TERRIFIED.

This skit works not only as an acting exercise but a performance piece. When performing for an audience, let the audience choose the emotions. Nothing is off limits. We've done foreign movies, wrestling matches, and even backwards versions of the skit.

The Emotion Skit

CHARACTERS

Dad, Mom, Son, Daughter

(Dad enters. His hand is behind his back.)

DAD- Honey, I'm home.

MOM- Oh, sugar baby, you're home.

DAD- Where are the kids?

MOM- I don't know.

DAD- *(calls off)* Kids, come down here.

(Son and Daughter enter.)

SON- You called?

DAUGHTER- What did you want?

DAD- I brought something for the whole family.

(Dad pulls his hand out as if holding a jar.)

MOM- What is it?

DAD- It's mayonnaise.

SON- But don't we already have twelve jars in the kitchen?

DAUGHTER- Yeah. You bring home mayonnaise every day. We're kind of tired of it.

DAD- You don't like mayonnaise?

DAUGHTER- No.

DAD- Go to your room.

(Daughter exits.)

DAD- What do you have to say?

SON- Nothing.

DAD- Go to your room.

SON- Okee dokee.

(Son exits.)

MOM- Honey, don't you think we already have enough mayonnaise?

DAD- There's always room for more mayonnaise. I love it. Now go to your room.

MOM- But I'm your wife.

DAD- I said go to your room.

(Mom exits.)

DAD- I love you, Mr. Mayonnaise.

(Dad kisses jar, then exits.)

The Numbers Game

This next exercise is often the most intimidating, but once your actors get the hang of it, it will likely be their favorite.

The Numbers Game is a form of improv that takes the focus off dialogue and puts it on vocal inflection, facial expressions, and body language. You can play the numbers game with any number of actors, and you can do just about any scene you want. There's only one rule: you cannot use real words. You can only speak in numbers.

Removing actual words and dialogue will force your actors to tell a story non-verbally. It's a powerful tool for digging into emotions and becoming more than just parrots who recite lines on stage.

When working with this game, make sure you create scenarios with distinct characters and clear-cut conflicts. The scenario I usually led with involves a girlfriend about to confront her boyfriend for cheating on her. This was always an easy, accessible topic for the actors to get into. The girls would pout and fume and glare while the boys squirmed and begged and pleaded - all while speaking numbers.

To add to the fun, I'd send the other woman into the scene. Sometimes she turned on the man and partnered with the other girl. Sometimes she took up for her man and a cat fight began. After one workshop, the number "23" became synonymous for "cat fight." Another time, "56" became a substitute for a curse word.

Another good scenario was to have a mom and daughter shopping for prom dresses. Mom was usually the one pleading for a conservative, boring dress, but just for fun, sometimes we'd make Mom the one trying to talk her daughter into something scandalous.

A follow up to that scene was often girls showing up at prom in the same dress. I'd add more and more actresses to the scene, all in the same dress, and we'd watch the scene get heated. Soon as it was over, I'd send four guys on stage who all show up in the same tux. Every time, it was the same result: the guys would high five and cheer, the complete opposite of the ladies.

Give your actors a mix of funny and serious scenes to work with using this game. You're not always going to be funny on stage, and this is one game that really lends itself to tapping into the darker, heavier emotions. Be conscientious about pushing actors too far. Yes, it CAN happen.

Scene Work: Toy Wars

The culmination of the workshop, as you might have guessed, is actually working on a scripted scene, and the scene I used for years and years was “Toy Wars.”

A semi-autobiographical bit, “Toy Wars” tells of the conflict between a single mom shopping for her son for Christmas and a rabid Star Wars fan looking for a limited edition Darth Maul action figure. There’s only one left on the shelf at the store, and the guy will do anything, ANYTHING, to get it from the woman holding it in her hand.

(Side bar: I wrote this script and dreamt up the “Darth Maul with cut in half action” long before there was such an action figure. I never received any royalties from Lucasfilm on it. Don’t expect I ever will either.)

After choosing a male and female to act out the scene, I’d give them a run down of their characters and the scenario. Then I’d turn them loose to give it a cold reading for the group. When the cold read was finished, I’d turn to the audience and call on them to help the actors to develop their characters, identify the emotions and motivations within the scene, and give directions for developing the scene.

Don’t take the lead in directing the scene. Act as a moderator, but let the audience in your workshop do the “directing.” This is a chance for them and the actors on stage to apply what you’ve been sharing with them.

Just to get you started, here are some of the questions you can use to help your actors develop the scene:

1. Who is Tony?
2. Who is Deanna?
3. What kind of person is Tony/Deanna?
4. What does Tony/Deanna want in this scene?
5. What tactics does Tony employ to get what he wants?
6. How does Deanna respond to Tony’s maneuvers?
7. How do Tony’s tactics evolve during the scene?
8. How does Deanna’s attitude change toward Tony?
9. How do you think Tony should act/speak at the start of this scene?
10. What sort of body language will Deanna use in response to Tony’s behavior?
11. How can the actors convey the fact that Tony and Deanna begin warming up toward one another?
12. How should Tony make his exit?

13. Given the ending, do you think “Tony” is his real name? How might you convey that in the action?

13. How should Deanna respond to Tony’s exit?

Spend five or ten minutes exploring the characters and the scene with questions like these, then run the scene a second time. After the second run, take time to ask more questions.

1. What did the actors do differently?
2. What worked?
3. What didn’t work?
4. What might work better?
5. Did you see anything else we can add or bring out to make the scene funnier and more memorable?

Spend another five or ten minutes on questions and suggestions, then run the scene one more time.

Toy Wars

By John Cospers

CHARACTERS

Tony- A rabid Star Wars fan

Deanna- A single mom

(Deanna is in a toy aisle, looking at SW figures. She is looking at one in particular. Tony walks down the aisle and sees the figure in her hands, one he really "needs." He hovers over her shoulder like a vulture. Deanna turns to face him.)

DEANNA- May I help you?

TONY- Do you work here?

DEANNA- No.

TONY- So why are you offering to help me?

DEANNA- It was a polite way of asking what the heck you're doing hovering over my shoulder like a vulture?

TONY- Oh...I was just...looking. Star Wars fan?

DEANNA- Me? No, this is for my son.

TONY- Your son?

DEANNA- He's 4, and he loves Star Wars. I had to take him to that Episode 1 twice. Did you see it?

TONY- Twenty seven times.

DEANNA- Twenty seven times?

TONY- Would have been twenty eight, but I had the flu the last week it was at the dollar theater.

DEANNA- So, what can you tell me about this figure?

TONY- Hmm? Oh, the Darth Maul with split in half action. It's a nice piece. Kinda rare, only ships one to a box. When you combine him with Blow Of Death Action Obi Wan, you can cut him in half like in the final battle scene. Kind of graphic.

DEANNA- I'll say.

TONY- Yeah, it's a unique one. I've been looking all over for it, actually. Toys R Us, Target, Wal-Mart, K-Mart...

DEANNA- Really.

TONY- Yeah, it's the last one of Wave 13 I don't have.

DEANNA- Hmmm. Well, it's the only Darth Maul I've found. My son absolutely loves him. He dressed as him for Halloween, and the church wouldn't allow him into the Halloween alternative party because he looked like the devil. I'm sure he'll love it.

TONY- Uhhh...maybe I didn't make myself clear. I've been looking for this particular figure all day. All week, actually. Some times hitting stores twice a day. It's a necessity for me.

DEANNA- I appreciate these things are hard to find, but I really think my son wants this for Christmas.

TONY- You know, I just came from Target, and they had a whole wall of the regular Darth Mauls sitting on the shelf.

DEANNA- Yes, but as you said, this one has that special cut in half thingy. That makes him unique.

TONY- Yes, but the significance will be completely lost on him. This isn't an item for a child, but a true collector.

DEANNA- You mean someone like you?

TONY- Exactly like me! I have the force running through my veins. *(lifts sleeve)* See this tattoo?

DEANNA- Yes.

TONY- The symbol of the Rebel Alliance.

DEANNA- The who?

TONY- The good guys in Star Wars Episodes 4 through 6!

DEANNA- Is this where my child is headed? Maybe I should just let you take it.

TONY- That's very generous of you.

DEANNA- Then again, my son has a much better grip on reality than you seem to have. Toys are for playing, not worshipping.

TONY- Playing with it?

DEANNA- It is a toy!

TONY- It's more than a toy! It's Americana! Pop culture! An icon, a symbol! It's to be placed on proud display on a shelf in it's original shell, not ripped out and chewed up by some 4 year old!

DEANNA- Excuse me?

TONY- I mean if anyone deserves that toy, it's someone who will treat it write. Treasure it. Care for it like fine China. Did you know that some of the original action figures from 1978 are worth thousands of dollars in their original packages? My 1978 Jawa with the vinyl cape will pay for four years of college.

DEANNA- Really? One toy paid for your college?

TONY- Well, no. I couldn't bring myself to sell it, so I got a job instead.

DEANNA- I didn't realize these things were actually worth something other than just fun. Maybe I ought to pick up some extras. Then Tony will have college money some day.

TONY- Tony? Did you say Tony?

DEANNA- He's my son.

TONY- That's my name.

DEANNA- No kidding?

TONY- Yeah.

DEANNA- What a small world. I'm Deanna.

TONY- Nice to meet you.

DEANNA- I'm sorry if I was a little gruff with you. I didn't mean to insult you. You're just a zealous fan who knows how to have fun and still act like a kid.

TONY- Don't think anything of it. We loyal fans are used to persecution.

DEANNA- Yeah, I remember all the news people making fun of the fans who camped out at the theater for tickets.

TONY- You saw us on TV?

DEANNA- You were there?

TONY- Of course I was there!

DEANNA- That's so funny! Tony made me drive by the theater so he could see all the nuts—I mean, fans in costume.

TONY- It was a lot of fun. Hey, maybe we could, you know, get together some time.

DEANNA- What?

TONY- We could get together. Do dinner or something.

DEANNA- I don't know.

TONY- Come on, it would be fun. I could show you my collection of toys.

DEANNA- Well, you seem harmless enough. It might be fun.

TONY- Can you give me your number?

DEANNA- You have something to write on?

TONY- No.

DEANNA- I may. *(hands Tony the toy)* Hold this.

(Deanna opens her purse, begins searching through her purse. Tony realizes his good fortune- she's given him the toy. He backs away slowly, then runs off. Deanna pulls out a scrap piece of paper and a pen.)

DEANNA- Here we go. *(writing)* 555-8123. And I'm usually home after—*(turns, sees Tony's gone)* Where'd he go? The toy! He took the toy! *(yells)* YOU REBEL SCUM!!!

(Deanna runs off.)

Wrap Up: One More Game

There's one more improv game I like to share before wrapping up. I choose three actors to come on stage, and I give them one more numbers game to play.

The first actor will be playing a Christian kid. The second is a Christian kid who is leading a double life - going to church on Sunday, partying on Saturday night. The third kid is the second kid's party buddy.

The scene begins with the Christian kids at the mall. All of a sudden, out of no where, the party friend walks by and sees their party friend. The challenge to the second kid is to keep the party friend and the Christian friend, the two sides to his or her life, separated.

Like most improv scenes, the result is usually funny. I once saw "party kid" come on singing "Iron Man" using numbers. But its also a powerful illustration of how difficult it is to lead a double life. It's the perfect set up to deliver one more spiritual lesson to your cast.

Wrap Up: Living Out Your Faith

You may be the greatest actor in the world. You have be able to move an audience to tears. You may be able to stir the hearts of people with a word, a look, a gesture of the hand. But if you're not living what you profess on stage, all your words and actions on stage mean nothing.

When you take the stage in God's name, you proclaim with your mouth (and body) that Jesus is Lord. You profess that the Word of God is truth. You are making a stand in a dark world. But it all means nothing if your confession of faith ends the second you step off the stage.

Think back to the movie scene. The two characters in that scene said one thing with their mouths and another with their bodies. If people hear us say, "Jesus is Lord," but see us living a life of sin, what message are we sending about our faith? It is an empty lie, just like the empty gestures of love by the silent movie actors. You've destroyed everything you worked for on stage.

You have come together to share the gospel through drama. The skits and plays we present are very much like the parables of Christ. They are stories, not lectures, and they can stay with an audience far longer than any three point outline. Don't short circuit the impact you can have by failing to live for Christ outside the church. Keep your hearts focused on God at church, at home, at school, and at work. Hold one another accountable to the standard of Christ. Support one another when you fail. Celebrate together when God gives you a victory.

God isn't looking for actors. He's looking for followers. If we want to make other people into true followers, we must become true followers ourselves. Don't do drama just because it's your gift. Do it as an offering for God, an extension of the life you're already leading away from the stage.

Scripture to Share:
1 Corinthians 13:1-3.

Questions? Comments?

I wrote this book to help drama leaders across the country instill a sense of confidence in their actors and encourage them to be true followers of Christ on stage and off. I hope you've found this ebook helpful, and if you have any questions, I hope you'll drop me a line and ask them.

I'm John Coper, and my email address is john@righteousinsanity.com. It has been my pleasure and honor to work in drama ministry since 1994. If I can be of any further help to you and your drama team, please let me know.

Thank you, and may God bless you and your drama team!