An Interdisciplinary Conducting Curriculum: Selected Theater Games From Viola Spolin’s “Improvisation for the Theater”

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Abstract
This article presents a series of theater games with clear connections to conducting and rehearsing music ensembles, explaining both how to play them and how young conductors will benefit from the experience. These games are published in Viola Spolin’s seminal text Improvisation for the Theater, which presents a series of exercises that foster communication, creativity, immediacy, and spontaneity. Many games also focus on creating and communicating character through physical movement and posture, awareness of the body in space, and manipulation of “space objects,” which are imaginary props made real in the mind of the observer through understanding of shared human experiences. Theater games are effectively experienced in short periods of time, intended for players of all ability and experience levels, and encourage immediate emotive communication, making them highly effective for young conductors and easily incorporated into undergraduate and graduate conducting classes.

Keywords
theater games, band, wind ensemble, music, music education, conducting, acting

In his 2017 study on the implementation of undergraduate degrees in conducting, Erik Garriott noted that currently “schools of music seldom offer training for undergraduate conductors beyond one or two classes” (Garriott, 2017, p. 8). He suggested that, considering this time constraint, it is challenging for undergraduate conducting classes to provide in-depth instruction in score study, musical interpretation, error detection, repertoire, rehearsal techniques, and comprehensive gestural vocabulary. As a result, students often learn advanced conducting techniques on their own through professional experience.

In his text Of Music and Music-Making, noted conductor Bruno Walter posits that technical ability is paramount to expressive music-making, stating that the saying “Mens sana in corpore sano” can be applied figuratively to music-making; the absolute correctness of the performance stands for the healthy body from which the soul of the work, unencumbered by physical imperfections, can roundly and clearly sound forth. (Walter, 1961, p. 84)

It is important to note that within Walter’s statements on the necessity of technical perfection, technique is always in service to “musical interpretation that bears witness to the spirit and soul of a work” (p. 84). Maestro Gunther Schuller applies a similar philosophy to conducting in his text The Compleat Conductor, stating that “all the physical, choreographic skills in the world will amount to nothing if they represent . . . an inadequate (emotional) feeling for the music,” but “a first-rate mind and ear can achieve very little if the technique needed to express what is in that mind and ear is deficient” (Schuller, 1997, p. 10).

Put another way, technical skill is a vitally important component to achieving mastery, but it should always serve a greater musical purpose; musical engagement and emotional impact should be the constant goal of both performers and conductors. As such, it is the belief of the author that expressive gesture should be practiced and taught alongside basic conducting techniques.

While gesture is the crux of most conducting classes, it is only a portion of what is required of conductors in a rehearsal setting. Depending on age and ability level of the group, conductors also must teach musical material to the players

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through a variety of rehearsal procedures (Hunsberger & Ernst, 1992). Keeping in mind the philosophy of artistic musicianship as the constant goal, the composer’s intent should inform every aspect of communication in rehearsals, including gesture and movement, pacing of the rehearsal, body language, and tone of voice when speaking to the ensemble. It is the belief of the author that rehearsals are most effective when they are an immersive experience for the musicians, never disengaged from the mood or character of the music.

If the above philosophies are held to be true, we are confronted with important problems in conducting pedagogy. Given the short time allotted for conducting classes, teachers are presented with the difficult task of helping students become musically engaged, expressive conductors. This requires a methodology that goes beyond technique, into the realm of meaningful gesture and facial expression. Finally, this awakened expressivity must extend from movement to the entire rehearsal process, cultivating an immersive musical environment.

One largely unexplored area with enormous potential for providing solutions to these problems is the work of Viola Spolin, one of the seminal figures in improvisational theater. This article presents selected exercises from her text Improvisation for the Theater, showing their direct connection to conducting and explaining how they can encourage expressive communication in young conductors.

**A Survey of Commonly Used and Recent Conducting Texts**

If the development of expressive gesture, body language, and facial expression is a goal of conducting curricula, then these topics should be included in the materials used for conducting courses. A brief examination of the most commonly used texts for conducting courses shows the opposite.

Romines (2000) found that the most commonly used textbooks for undergraduate conducting classes were The Modern Conductor (Green & Gibson, 2004), The Art of Conducting (Hunsberger & Ernst, 1992), and Basic Conducting Techniques (Labuta & Matthews, 2018). Since Romines’s study, two more notable conducting texts have been published: The Eloquent Conductor (Price, 2015) and Conducting: The Art of Communication (Bailey & Payne, 2015). A brief examination of the most recent available editions of these five texts shows an emphasis on technique over expressive gesture, highlighting the need for supplemental pedagogical tools in this area.

The seventh edition of Elizabeth Green and Mark Gibson’s The Modern Conductor begins with Green’s original Credo, which states, “We build technique only to ensure that our music can achieve its unforgettable moments, evanescent as they are, before once more returning to its prison of impatient silence” (Green & Gibson, 2004, p. xv). Despite this stated commitment to expressive musicianship, the vast majority of the gestural information in The Modern Conductor focuses on hand and arm motion, going so far as to state that “Your hands-arms are your technique in conducting” (p. 2). Chapter 5 of the text, titled “Expressive Gestures,” focuses on active versus passive gestures and portraying varied articulations within beat patterns (pp. 41–58). While it remains an important text by one of the most noted conducting teachers of the 20th century, The Modern Conductor contains almost no information on posture, body language, or facial expression.

In the preface to The Art of Conducting (Hunsberger & Ernst, 1992), Hunsberger and Ernst ponder the problems faced by conducting teachers given the importance of conducting classes but limited time devoted to them. This text, which is the outcome of extensive examination and revision of the conducting curriculum at the Eastman School of Music, is intended as a curriculum for conducting from basic to advanced classes. The greatest strength of this text is the carefully curated excerpts included for conducting practice, which take up more than half of the book. From the standpoint of teaching expressive gesture, however, there is little to no information provided. While Hunsberger and Ernst introduce conducting style/articulation and dynamic contrasts earlier than Green, the focus remains almost entirely on the conductor’s hands and arms. Posture is addressed briefly in the first chapter, with no additional information on expressive possibilities. Eye contact is mentioned infrequently, and there is no portion of the book dedicated to facial expression.

Of the three most common texts from the 2000 Romines dissertation, Basic Conducting Techniques (Labuta & Matthews, 2018) has received the most recent update, with Wendy Matthews as co-author of the seventh edition. This contemporary edition offers many new instructional tools, with a companion website that includes audio files, transposed parts, full scores to conducting excerpts, and video examples of conducting techniques. The text is based on “competencies,” which are measurable and observable skills that the authors believe all conducting students must master (pp. 271–272). While this approach creates a text that is highly organized and progresses systematically through a series of clear goals and outcomes, the gestural information is almost entirely centered on technique and often simplified without room for gestural variety. For example, the only release gestures presented are basic circular cutoffs, and crescendos/diminuendos are achieved by raising or lowering the left hand with a concurrent change in size of the beat pattern. Searching for information on expressive conducting in this text yields little information. The chapter titled “Conducting Musical Styles” focuses on showing articulation within the beat pattern and is limited to three pages (pp. 46–48). Dedicated material on expressive conducting does not appear until the 10th chapter and remains entirely focused on the hands and arms.

Of the texts examined, Price’s (2015) The Eloquent Conductor is the most expansive, including a large textbook,
a separate volume of 69 music excerpts for conducting practice that includes a CD of audio examples and a DVD of demonstration videos. Price seems to agree with the philosophy stated earlier in this article: “conducting gestures are integrally connected to the music,” and “building this into the foundation rather than adding it later may prevent habits forming that could lead to routine or generic conducting” (p. 35). This text and the accompanying materials are extensive, covering a wide variety of topics in great detail. While the text encourages specificity and variety of gestures to free young conductors from the “Tyranny of Timekeeping” (p. 53), The Eloquent Conductor still focuses almost entirely on hands and arms, introducing expressive gesture only as it relates to beat patterns. Posture is discussed briefly at the beginning of the book, and there is little to no mention of facial expression as an expressive tool.

In the preface to the second edition of Conducting: The Art of Communication (Bailey & Payne, 2015), Bailey justifies the content of his textbook, stating that “there have been a few popular or successful conducting textbooks aimed at teaching the art of conducting, but none satisfactorily address the technical, analytical, and expressive aspects of conducting” (p. vii). In contrast, Bailey asserts that this text “emphasizes the whole conductor, not just his baton technique,” and it “gives instruction in technique but focuses as much on the use of other expressive aspects of conducting like facial expression and body movement” (p. viii). Many aspects of this text are indicative of a musical approach to gesture; stylistic gestures are introduced immediately alongside beat patterns, the book presents multiple options for gestures and encourages students to use their musicianship as the determining factor on which to choose, and more text is dedicated to expressive gestures than in any of the other books examined. Bailey’s text is the only one with a portion dedicated to communicating through facial expression. While expressive gesture in all forms is an important aspect of this book, it still does not include many practice strategies or activities to awaken students’ potential for expressive gesture.

None of these texts is substandard or inadequate for classroom use. They all have strengths, be it organization and sequencing of material, an extensive collection of excellent musical excerpts for practice, or new educational tools for the modern conducting student. However, this review does illuminate a glaring weakness within current conducting texts: a lack of information on developing expressive communication beyond the hands and arms. The majority of the curricula laid out in these texts do not consider musical expression to be a foundational skill, introducing expressive gestures as an advanced concept to be applied to beat patterns at a later time. Most importantly, only one dedicates a significant portion to communication through facial expression.

If it is important to foster expressive gestural capability in students, conducting teachers must find methods and materials to do so outside of published conducting curricula. To that end, there are many methodologies for cultivating emotional communication, both verbal and nonverbal, in a variety of other artistic disciplines that can greatly enhance the study of conducting. Chapman (2008) investigated how some of these interdisciplinary techniques were implemented in conducting classes at various universities around the country and discovered that many leading professors incorporate elements of dance movement, mime, and theater. Dance and mime studies focus primarily on gesture and movement, while theater provides an additional advantage through potential for immersive rehearsal techniques. In particular, Spolin’s methodology can be effectively experienced in small periods of time, can be used in a variety of situations, is simple enough that actors from a variety of backgrounds and experience levels will benefit from it, and encourages immediate emotive communication, making theater games both highly beneficial and viable within the time constraints of university conducting curricula.

An Overview of Theater Games

Viola Spolin’s work with recreational games began in 1923 as a protégé of Neva Boyd at the Chicago Hull House. Founded by Jane Addams, a pioneer in the field of Social Work and the first American woman awarded the Nobel Peace Prize, Hull House was a settlement house that provided social and educational opportunities to local working-class immigrants, helping them assimilate into American culture and society. Boyd, an early theorist on the power of noncompetitive group play, instituted a program of social, language, and artistic training for children. In this environment, Spolin was first exposed to dramatic games as a means of education and communication, and she began forming the basis for the improvisational theater movement in the United States. Many of her students went on to succeed in theater of all kinds. Particularly notable is her son, Paul Sills, who used Spolin’s techniques to co-found The Second City theater troupe in Chicago, as well as to create Paul Sills’ Story Theater, a Tony Award–winning Broadway show. Spolin later expanded the scope of her games, so that they were no longer restricted to only improvised theater; her five books outline their use in rehearsals for scripted plays, by individuals or groups, in workshops of all kinds, and in the classroom (Sills, 2018). Actors of all ability levels, ages, and backgrounds can use these games for a variety of purposes and experience immediate results.

Spolin’s philosophy is that students (or in her language, “players”) learn through experience, because it is in participation that players are immersed both intellectually and physically in the process. Through immediacy and spontaneity, the all-important “intuition” is unlocked, which Spolin defined as “the area of knowledge which is beyond the restrictions of culture, race, education, psychology, and age; deeper than the ‘survival dress’ of mannerisms, prejudices, intellectualisms, and borrowings most of us wear to live out our daily lives” (Spolin, 1999, p. 19).
Theater games present a problem, also called the “focus” of the exercise. The players set out to master that focus in the moment through creative expression. This framework prioritizes immediate perception over preconception, creating an organic experience in real time for the players, and their exploration of the focus will lead them to mastery through intuition (Spolin, 1999).

For this to happen, certain parameters must be in place. First, Spolin insists that the teacher or director must do away with authoritarianism and any approval/disapproval framework. Spolin states that when we operate with the judgmental mindset that is predominant in our culture, “self-identity is obscured, our bodies become misshapen, natural grace is gone, and learning is affected. Both the individual and the art form are distorted and deprived, and insight is lost to us” (p. 7). Instead, players must feel free to experiment without judgment, make progress on their own terms, and discover how to solve problems on their own. Success in an improvisational environment is also dependent on healthy group interaction and agreement. While a shy player slowly easing into participation is acceptable, one aggressive player dominating the interaction will create competition and tension among group members, which impedes the group problem-solving process. Rather than coaching players to find techniques that work and return to them repeatedly, Spolin encourages players to focus on creating communication, believing that acting technique will naturally grow from experience. Finally, both players and teacher should focus on “physicalization,” which Spolin defines as the physical manifestation of communication. Inner feelings or intellectual ideas are never on display unless they are made physically apparent; thus, expressing ideas or emotions physically is the only way they may be communicated to an audience.

After a theater game is played, the observing players and director all participate in evaluation. In this workshop environment, all are welcome to assist in the problem-solving process. This also must be free of judgment or personal prejudice, as the experimental atmosphere requires that anything is possible within the parameters of the game. In addition, the games often require what Spolin calls “side coaching” from the director, which is ongoing feedback in short, direct statements or questions that keep the game moving and help guide the players without providing answers for them.

To ensure that a theater game is truly improvised, the director must not allow preplanning among groups. The structure of a game may be planned, meaning where, who, what, and the focus of the game, but as Spolin puts it, we must “avoid the How” (p. 35). Knowing “the How” before a game begins prioritizes the result rather than the process of discovery, and by definition, preplanning means bringing old material to the stage. It is only by performing in the moment that the players will be open to growth through a new experience.

Just from this brief introduction, many connections to conducting are already apparent. Foremost among these is the immediate focus on physical communication. While it is not true of every acting methodology, many do not incorporate physical aspects until later in the character development process. The immediacy of the intuitive problem-solving experience will also prove helpful to conductors of all levels. In Spolin’s games, preplanning should never occur; while conductors may choreograph certain gestures, there is always the possibility they do not elicit the desired response from the ensemble, and then the ability to spontaneously alter physical communication becomes vital.

To learn how to conduct, students must spend time on podium in front of their peers. Many young conductors experience intense fear of judgment when on podium, which causes them to assume a character that is unfelt, implausible, and often is interpreted by ensemble musicians as stern. Through theater games, students can experience Spolin’s idea of intuition, which reduces or eliminates the fear of judgment, allowing them to reflect the music through emotive gesture and facial expression more freely as well as creating a positive, open mindset when receiving critique in front of the group.

Some of Spolin’s favorite side coaching phrases may ring true for the conducting teacher as well; “Show, don’t tell” (Spolin, 1999, p. 37) refers to direct communication instead of passive use of props or language, and “Act, don’t react” (p. 39) may motivate conductors to influence the music with proactive gestures. Spolin also writes that “Improvisation is not exchange of information between players; it is communion” (p. 45). Substituting the word “conducting” for “improvisation” in that sentence illuminates a noble goal for teachers and students of conducting alike.

**Theater Games in Practice**

**Procedure and Set-Up**

To begin a theater game, the director/side coach should give a brief explanation of the focus and any procedures that are necessary; if desired, this can be read directly from *Improvisation for the Theater* (Spolin, 1999) or another text. Some games require that players agree on aspects prior to playing, such as “who” (i.e., a married couple), and “where” (i.e., a kitchen), but always players should “avoid the how,” meaning they should not preplan the structure or dramatic arc of the scene. The game is then played, with side coaching to help the players remain conscious of the focus. Afterward, all observers and players are invited to evaluate and give feedback. This discussion is also facilitated by the director as necessary.

Spolin believes that theater game workshops are most effective when staged in theaters that include sound systems, stage lighting, and other stage equipment. However, most of the games with clear connections to conducting study are among the simpler of Spolin’s exercises, making this unnecessary. The minimum requirements are a large, open space.
and a few basic pieces of furniture. Many conducting classes are taught in ensemble rehearsal spaces, which work very well for this purpose.

Theater games are a physical activity, so players should wear comfortable clothing that facilitates physical movement. Also, the attitude of the players and relationship with the side coach should be constantly monitored. When there is guidance and occasional correction without judgment, the players will feel free to experiment, express their observations, and will be relaxed, engaged, and will enjoy the experience.

**Traditional Games**

Viola Spolin and Paul Sills often began workshops with traditional children’s games, such as “Red Light/Green Light” (Spolin, 1999, p. 408), “New York” (p. 406), “Who Started the Motion?” (p. 68), and “Pussy Wants a Corner” (p. 408). The goal of this is for the players to play without tension, enjoying the act without thought to who wins or loses. It puts players in a childlike, open frame of mind, ready to access their intuition (Sills, 2018). While it is tempting to skip this step in light of the limited time inherent in conducting classes, playing games such as these can make the class much more comfortable with each other, lessening the potentially crippling fear of judgment many students experience when on podium for the first time.

**Orientation Games**

Although not played at every workshop, Spolin highly recommends that players experience the game titled “Exposure” (Spolin, 1999, p. 53) at some point. This simple game involves groups of players standing in front of the audience, making them uncomfortable due to their acute awareness of being observed. After all players have experienced this discomfort, they are given a simple task, such as counting the number of chairs in the room. During evaluation, the vast majority of students will acknowledge the discomfort they felt initially, but realize that having a task to complete made them feel much more at ease. In other words, the presence of a focus demanded their attention, thereby allowing them to be in front of an audience without fear. When conducting, the focus is the music; again, if students put their attention on the concept of no motion. The goal is for the players to think of their motions as a flipbook, focusing on the still pictures or moments without motion rather than the movement. This can simultaneously heighten awareness of the body in space and release tension, making the movements effortless, both of which are highly beneficial for conducting.

“No Motion” often segues directly into the “Space Walk” series of games (Sills, 2018). There are many variations of “Space Walk,” all of which focus on players moving in different manners by imagining changes to the space around them (i.e., moving through space that is thick and viscous). These exercises have the beneficial effect of introducing the illusion of resistance while circumventing conscious thought and effort, arriving at gestures in a more organic fashion.

“Space Walk” can also serve as a first step into physicalization of emotion and character, by walking in the manner of another person or changing the perceived atmosphere or mood rather than the substance of the space (i.e., moving through a busy city sidewalk after receiving bad news).

**Space Objects**

Rather than working with actual props, most theater games involve the use of “space objects.” More than just invisible or pretend props, Spolin states, “Objects made of space substance may be looked upon as thrusts/projections of the (invisible) inner self into the visible world, intuitively perceived/sensed as a manifest phenomenon, real!” (Spolin, 1999, pp. 79–80). In other words, when players become adept at creating, maintaining, and manipulating space objects, the audience believes they see physical objects. Paul Sills used this phenomenon to great effect when creating *Paul Sills’ Story Theater*, as the original Broadway production used no sets or props whatsoever, telling vivid and imaginative stories on a blank stage (Sills, 2018). The connection to conducting is obvious; while the space objects used may not be specific, the act of holding and maintaining the size, weight, and consistency of a space object in the open hand...
can create a gesture that is perceived as organic and relatable by ensemble members.

The game called “Space Substance Introduction (For Hands)” (Spolin, 1999, p. 391) is the best initial experience in space manipulation for novice players (Sills, 2018). Players work individually, standing with their palms facing, and focus on the space substance in between their hands. They are then coached to experiment with this space by changing their hand positions and observing how the space is affected. This can naturally evolve into the next games, “Space Shaping/Single” and “Space Shaping/Ensemble” (Spolin, 1999, pp. 81–83), which focus on allowing the space substance to take shape as space objects, which in turn can be manipulated in a variety of ways, first by individuals and later in spontaneous group interactions. Through all of these exercises, the space substance and space objects become very real to the players as they experience size, weight, density, temperature, viscosity, and so on. Practicing manipulating space can pay large dividends for conductors, adding realism to their gestures.

As players become comfortable with space substance, more games dealing with space objects are incorporated. “Play Ball” (Spolin, p. 64), “Jump Rope” (p. 387), “Tug-of-War” (p. 63), and others add increased layers of interactivity as players must communicate with each other. To create realism, these games also require a higher level of consistency in the space objects that are manipulated and/or passed between players, and the physicalization of the activity becomes more important. For example, playing “Tug-of-War” requires that two teams use a rope of space substance, and as they pull in opposite directions, players will unconsciously begin to show signs of exertion such as tense muscles, furrowed facial expression, and heavy breathing, all while manipulating an invisible rope. The ability to show this type of tension against an illusory source of resistance is invaluable to conductors.

Following these basic space object exercises, there are a large number of theater games available that incorporate space objects into short acting scenes. Among the most simple and accessible are “The Where Game” (Spolin, 1999, p. 98) and the “Involvement” series (pp. 65–67, 76, 111). “The Where Game” is played by a team of players, one of whom starts the game by entering the stage area and defining the setting by interacting with a space object. As players understand where the scene is taking place, they enter and join the scene by interacting with space objects of their own. “Involvement” games use smaller teams, interacting together over a shared space object (i.e., making a bed together). For young conductors, these more involved games will increase their comfort with space substance, so using simple space objects while conducting will become organic and elegant.

**Emotion, Expression, and Character**

While the aforementioned games offer opportunities for improvement for conductors of varied ability levels, they focus primarily on movement. The aspect of conducting that is often the most difficult for students mired in an approval/disapproval mindset is emoting while on podium. This is most prominently seen in a lack of facial expression, giving an impression of stoicism or emotional detachment, but it also results in plain, nondescript language and tone of voice when giving verbal feedback during rehearsals. Theater directors commonly use theater games as exercises to increase the depth of understanding actors have for their characters and to access and channel emotions that are part of the shared human experience. These games can do the same for conductors.

The many variations in the “Gibberish” series of games (Spolin, 1999, pp. 114–118, 384–386) involve the concept of communicating with nonsense language. Spolin states that gibberish is “a vocal utterance accompanying an action . . . . The meaning of a sound in gibberish should not be understood unless the actor conveys it by action, expression, or tone of voice” (p. 112). These exercises include delivering short lectures in gibberish, holding conversations, and staging scenes. Other variations include some players speaking gibberish while others act as translators, which provides immediate feedback on the clarity of expression by the gibberish speaker. While speaking gibberish, most players will find themselves enhancing their hand movements; these are natural gestures, widely understood by most people, and they can directly inform conducting gestures as well. Players will also exaggerate the emotion they display through tone and pitch of voice, and these highly engaging speech patterns should continue into rehearsal settings when speaking to the ensemble is necessary.

Other games in this category can do much to increase students’ comfort in acting expressively in front of groups as well as add depth and subtlety to the emotion and character they portray. While Spolin does not use the term, some of these games utilize the philosophy of overtraining to push players well beyond what is necessary, so that emoting on podium in a natural fashion is no longer a daunting task. “Explore and Heighten” (p. 217) is one example, as groups of players act out simple scenes and are coached to explore aspects of the play (i.e., space objects, silences, motions, etc.) and heighten, or exaggerate, those aspects to the extreme.

In contrast, games that add depth, subtlety, and nuance to physicalization include “How Old Am I?” (Spolin, 1999, p. 69) and “Animal Images” (p. 241). In “How Old Am I?” a simple bus stop is set up, and players approach it while physicallyizing characters of different ages. New players will often do so through pantomime (i.e., a young character playing with a yo-yo and chewing bubble gum with grossly enlarged motions). When asked to reflect on this, they will realize they were “telling” rather than “showing”; they did not embody their chosen characters in a natural, true-to-life fashion. A second attempt will illicit discovery of body language, posture, and facial expression that are much more genuine and grounded in reality. For conducting students, this demonstrates...
the need to gesture in a manner that seems natural to the ensemble and resonates with their shared human experiences. “Animal Images” asks players to take on the characteristics of a chosen animal until they are fully immersed, including posture, movement, and vocalization as the animal. They are then coached to stand and become human again while retaining the personality and characteristics of the animal and to interact with each other in a specific setting. Conductors are tasked with realizing the composer’s intent and communicating it to the ensemble through nonverbal means. This may place demands on conductors that go beyond their own personalities; for instance, music may demand that the conductor gesture with furious anger when they are peaceful or taciturn by nature. Theater games like “Animal Images” can open avenues to the exploration of a wide variety of possible character traits to bring to the podium.

Suggestions for Future Study

While Chapman (2008) discovered that a wide variety of interdisciplinary teaching methods are already in use in conducting classes across the nation, there are few published studies that attempt to prove the efficacy of these techniques. Running (2008) found that a large amount of acting practice at the beginning of a semester does not foster improvement in expressive gesture beyond what is achieved in a more standard conducting curriculum. Theater games are unique in both goals and practice when compared with other philosophies of acting, so it remains possible that a conducting curriculum that incorporates a sequence of games throughout an academic term could produce measurable positive results. To date, no one has conducted an empirical study on the interdisciplinary use of theater games in a music setting. For this to become a widely accepted pedagogical tool, such a study may be a necessary step.

After further experimentation and research, a resource on theater games for conductors could be made available to the conducting community through publication. This need not be an entire conducting textbook based on theater games. Instead, it could be a curated selection of theater games with information on how they relate directly to conducting. As noted earlier, there are multiple texts available that contain excellent information on conducting technique. A conductor’s guide to theater games could help address the lack of methodology relating to expressive communication without undermining information from the previously adopted text.

Conclusion

The exercises discussed here offer a small subset of the 276 theater games described in Improvisation for the Theater (Spolin, 1999). Not every theater game relates to the study of conducting, and it seems that as games become more closely related to stage acting, they are less applicable for conductors. Indeed, entire chapters of the text, such as those dedicated to “Non-Directional Blocking” (pp. 145–156) and “Broadcasting and Technical Effects” (pp. 180–188), hold little specific value to musical gesture. However, there are also chapters on “Character” (pp. 233–254), “Emotion” (pp. 219–232), and “Acting With the Whole Body” (pp. 135–144) that are replete with exercises that can facilitate great growth for those willing to play them with a spirit of exploration and spontaneity.

As undergraduate conducting study is usually allotted just one or two semesters, implementing these techniques into a conducting curriculum requires creativity and flexibility on the part of the teacher. While theater games can be used on podium with a single student, they are most effectively experienced in conjunction with group problem-solving. Because Running’s (2008) research revealed that a large amount of theater work at the beginning of conducting study is not effective, a more successful approach should incorporate short theater games sessions interspersed throughout the term. Graduate conducting curricula are often more flexible, and graduate students will no doubt benefit from playing theater games as well.

Without question, the best way to understand the inner workings of theater games is to experience them. While training in acting is not necessary to begin experimenting with theater games, those with no prior experience will benefit from interacting with experienced players and coaches. Theater games are popular among actors and directors, so finding collaborators may be as simple as contacting local theater colleagues. There are also a number of improvisational theater troupes operating in cities all over the United States, many of which use some variation of Viola Spolin’s methods and games in rehearsal and/or performance.

The experience level of the side coach will no doubt have a direct impact on the experience of the players. Aretha Sills, daughter of Paul Sills and granddaughter of Viola Spolin, continues to teach in the manner of her forebears through regular classes in Los Angeles and a series of workshops across the United States. While not all games included in these workshops apply directly to conducting, they are an outstanding opportunity to experience theater games from the closest living source to their founder, and they are highly recommended.

Viola Spolin’s theater games are adaptable to a variety of educational situations, enjoyable for players of all ages and ability levels, and offer immediate feedback and growth to the participants. They stimulate creativity and problem-solving, and perhaps most importantly, require the players to be focused, intuitive, and present in the moment, the importance of which cannot be overstated for beginning and experienced conductors alike. Although this is certainly not the only possible method for fostering expressive gesture in conductors, theater games have much to offer, and their potential for stimulating student growth in emotive conducting and engaging rehearsal techniques is nearly limitless.
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