

The following is an excerpt from the book:

Insight Improvisation

Melding Meditation, Theater, and Therapy for Self-Exploration, Healing, and Empowerment

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To learn more, please visit <http://www.insightimprov.org>.

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Amplification

When I asked Suzuki Roshi for his advice about working in the kitchen, he said, “When you wash the rice, wash the rice. When you cut the carrots, cut the carrots. When you stir the soup, stir the soup.” Though very similar, this is not the same as, “be mindful in the kitchen,” which makes it sound like you have two things to do: washing and being mindful, cutting and being mindful, stirring and being mindful. What would that mindfulness part look like? Probably a bit stiff, as your impulse will be to move slowly and carefully so that only a moderate amount of energy and emotion arises to meet the circumstances. In other words most people hear be mindful as keep yourself in check.

Yet what is magnificent and magical is finding out how to manifest the cutting of carrots with your whole body and mind; how to wash the rice with your eyes and your hands, connecting consciousness with the senses and the world—not just going through the motions.... When you stop going through the motions and manifest the stirring of soup, alive in the present moment, emotions may surface. While some find this problematic and seemly recommend dispassion, my suggestion is to invite your passion to cook.

— Edward Espe Brown (2008)

For actors—for all of us, really—the voice and body are our instruments of self-expression, vehicles for communicating and conveying emotion and passion. In order to be fully self-expressed, we can learn to “play” these instruments with abandon and with passion, to explore the range of what the voice and body can do, even to their outer limits. By doing so, we can also better learn to modulate the level of energy we bring to each moment whether cutting carrots or talking with friends.

Ultimately, we can change our fundamental orientation toward the voice and body, no longer seeing them as mere instruments or vehicles for content, but discovering what it is like to be influenced and inspired by our own sounds and movements—the feeling of the voice vibrating in the chest, or an arm slowly raising—creating a positive feedback cycle of self-awareness, creativity, and self-expression.

This chapter introduces the Amplification exercise—a challenging and fun way of exploring vocal and physical range—as well as a number of variations on that exercise that add interaction with a partner, language, story, and role play.

The Amplification exercise was inspired by the work of Ruth Zaporah, choreographer, improviser, and creator of Action Theater (1995) who has been highly influenced by Zen Buddhism. I am also indebted to my training with members of the Roy Hart Theater, especially teacher Ivan Midderigh, for introducing me to new ways of exploring the limits of vocal range. My colleague Lorraine Grosslight and I created the Amplification exercise while working one day in the studio, and I have since added several more variations which appear in this chapter.

Amplification		
<p>Basic Amplification</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Warming up • Fundamentals • FAQ • Feedback/coaching • Amplification as Meditation 	<p>Primary Amplification</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Word Amplification • Role Amplification • Amplification Duet/Trio • Amplification Dialogue 	<p>Secondary Amplification</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Amplified Monologue • Amplified Story • Amplified Scene • ...and more...

Basic Amplification

Warming Up

The activities in the previous chapter, Naked Amplification, make a good prelude for Amplification, particularly in a workshop context. Here's another possible warm-up sequence:

1. Meditate on impulse. After participants begin with their own stretching and/or simultaneous authentic movement, have them find a comfortable position for a brief meditation—sitting on the floor is fine. Invite awareness of the body, and the breath. Then add the following: “Continuing with your meditation, we’re going to shift our awareness now as a way to prepare for our work on Amplification. In the Amplification exercise, we will be identifying sound/movement impulses and amplifying them. In this meditation, we can begin to be aware of how those impulses originate. Shift your

awareness now to notice movement in the body—even small, subtle movements: breath, pulse, vibration, etc. (Pause.) Notice where in the body or mind an impulse to move arises. Notice how you react or respond to that impulse. It could be as simple as relaxing a muscle, or an impulse to swallow. (Pause.) See if you can notice an impulse and not act on it. If you do act on it, can you do it slowly and mindfully, noticing every bit of sensation?” Give time to explore impulses in the meditation and then bring the meditation to a gradual close.

2. Add sound and movement. Following the meditation, invite the group to stand in a circle and introduce a sound/movement warm-up:

Ha! Circle. This is a classic improv warm-up. Pass a “HA!” and a clap around the circle. Next, invite participants to send the HA!/clap to anyone in the circle. Encourage the group to use their energy and creativity.

Advanced Ha! Now replace the “HA!” with any sound and the clap with any gesture. Demonstrate how to use whole body gestures, and whole voice sounds. Challenge the group to not repeat sounds and gestures.

Advanced Ha! with Mirroring. Same as above, but now whoever receives the sound/gesture must mirror it back to the sender before sending something new to someone else.

3. Dialogue with amplification. Invite participants to grab a partner. Have one person begin by sending a sound/gesture to the other. As in Advanced Ha! with Mirroring, the other will mirror back that sound/gesture—but now they will also amplify it. For this warm-up, keep the explanation of Amplification simple: “Amplify the sound

and the movement in any way you like—you can make it louder, bigger, stretch it out, make it faster, repeat it, etc.”

Then the first person does the same, further amplifying the sound and movement, so that it bounces back and forth, becoming increasingly Amplified. “See if you can notice *how* your partner amplified the sound and the movement, so that you can take it further in the same direction. For example, if they increased the pitch of the sound, can you go even higher (rather than, say, make it louder)?”

At any time either partner can send a brand new sound/gesture, to start a new sequence. After a few minutes, invite pairs to debrief with one another, and then rejoin the circle to share what they discovered with the whole group.

Fundamentals

Amplification in its simplest form is a one-person improvisation. Here are the bare-bones instructions:

- 1) **Begin with a sound/movement impulse.**
- 2) **Amplify that impulse in some way.**
- 3) **In any moment you have a choice:**
 - a. **You can continue to amplify the impulse,**
 - b. **You can drop it and return to neutral, or**
 - c. **You can have a brand new sound/movement impulse.**

So, what do we mean by these terms: “sound/movement impulse,” “amplify the impulse,” and “return to neutral”?

By a **sound/movement impulse** (or **SMI** for short) we mean any movement combined with any vocal sound. For example, a twitch of the finger and a little squeak. Or, walking three steps and bending over, combined with a raspy groan and a loud grunt. The SMI can be very short, or can be a slightly longer phrase. It shouldn't be too long—usually 1-5 seconds. (But remember that all the rules in this book were made to be broken!) In the course of practicing Amplification, it's best to vary the length of one's initial SMI. Also note that snapping the fingers or clapping the hands is not an SMI—it's missing the vocal element. If you have an initial impulse that's missing the vocal (or physical) part, simply repeat the impulse and add the missing piece.

By **amplifying the impulse** we mean repeating the SMI with some kind of amplification: making it bigger, faster, louder, stretching it out, etc. However, there are many other kinds of amplification—those we do not tend to think of as amplification—such as making the impulse smaller, softer, slower, shorter, etc. These methods amplify in the sense of bringing attention or focus to the impulse. It is also possible to excerpt the initial impulse, repeating just a part as a way to “spotlight” it. One can also amplify a small physical impulse by gradually having it fill the entire body. (See the chart “Dimensions of Amplification,” below, for a more complete list of ways to amplify an impulse.)

Dimensions of Amplification		
<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Voice</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Volume • Pitch/Inflection • Sound quality/Timbre • Enunciation/Clarity • Emphasis • Singing 	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Body Language</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Gesture • Facial expression • Posture • Stance/Orientation • Use of space • Size (bigger or smaller) • Level (higher or lower) • Open or closed • Expand impulse from one area of body to gradually include entire body—or the reverse 	<p style="text-align: center;"><i>Overall/Gestalt</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Speed: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Stretch or Compress ○ Increase or decrease number or length of Pauses ○ Accelerate or Decelerate • Internal Repetition / Number of Repetitions • Excerpt/Spotlight • Emotion/Passion • Image • Role/Character

For example, if my initial SMI is a finger twitch and a little squeak, I may amplify that impulse by gently increasing the range of movement of my finger, while stretching out my squeak to be a longer squeak. Alternatively, I could, over the course of several amplifications, have the finger twitch affect my whole hand, then my arm, then my whole body. At the same time I could make my squeak louder and louder—or, I might change the pitch of my squeak, making it higher and higher.

Note that in Amplification we never just repeat an SMI—we are always amplifying it in some way with each iteration. However, you do not need to amplify every impulse that arises; step #2 in the instructions above can be skipped occasionally. So if an impulse comes that the improviser for whatever reason does not wish to amplify, they can either return to neutral or follow it right away with another SMI.

Also, when amplifying, do not get carried away—respect injuries and the limitations of the body. To experience the exercise fully, it's important to stretch beyond where you might habitually stop—but please do not hurt yourself in the process. (Note that projecting loudly with the voice is fine if one inhales deeply first; feeling a little hoarse after this exercise is normal and should go away within a day or so.)

By **return to neutral** we mean dropping the current sound and movement, returning to a relaxed, mindful stillness. To be neutral one does not need to be standing—I can remain in whatever position my last amplification left me in (e.g., kneeling on the floor), but let my face, arms, and the rest of my body relax and come to rest. Returning to neutral is like wiping the slate clear for whatever is to come next. Note that according to the instructions, it is not necessary to return to neutral after each series of amplifications—sometimes you may have a brand new SMI and go directly into amplifying it.

It's helpful to vary the pattern of returning to neutral versus changing immediately to a new SMI. It is also good to vary the number of times one tends to amplify an impulse. Typically one amplifies an impulse 3-5 times, but in the course of an improvisation I may be moved to amplify a particular impulse 10 times—stretching my voice and body to the limit—while other impulses I might not amplify at all.

The Basic Amplification activity can be as long or short as you like. Working with a partner as your witness/audience, try it for three to five minutes, get some feedback from them, and then try it again or switch roles.

Amplification FAQ

How do I know when to stop amplifying and change to a new SMI?

Answer: whenever you want to. This can be when the current impulse “loses its juice,” or when it becomes too much.

However, notice if you habitually give up on amplifying an impulse before you reach your limit. Commit fully to what is already happening, rather than seek comfort or distraction in something new. See what happens if you amplify beyond what you think you can. You may surprise yourself with what you are capable of. It is when the actor is fully committed that the audience is completely engaged.

What's the difference between amplifying an impulse and transforming it?

Amplification is distinct from transformation. Say I begin with a finger twitch and a high squeak. I could transform that impulse by moving my finger around in different ways, and start to play with the pitches of my squeak. Eventually, this could transform into a dance with my whole hand and a tune I am singing. Then it could become a walk through the room while waving like the queen, and saying hello to the crowd. In the Amplification exercise, we are not continuously changing the impulse into something new—we are consciously choosing to either amplify the original impulse, drop it and return to neutral, or start a new SMI.

Do this (amplification): $a \rightarrow a1 \rightarrow a2 \rightarrow a3, b \rightarrow b1 \rightarrow b2, \text{ neutral, c, } d \rightarrow d1, \text{ etc.}$

Not this (transformation): $a \rightarrow b \rightarrow c \rightarrow d, \text{ etc.}$

However, it's also important not to get too strict about the “no transforming” rule. Any amplification of an SMI is, in a sense, a transformation of that impulse. What is important is for the improviser to remain aware of the difference between amplifying an initial impulse versus changing the impulse into something totally new.

Can I amplify an SMI across multiple dimensions at once?

Yes! It's great fun to work with multiple simultaneous dimensions of amplification—e.g. to gradually get louder, higher pitched, and faster, all at the same time. When first learning Amplification, try amplifying one dimension at a time (that is, one vocal and one physical dimension at a time), to help practice making specific choices; over time, you can add more than one simultaneous dimension.

What is an internal repetition?

An SMI—or the amplification of an SMI—can contain repeated sounds or movements. For example, if the initial SMI is saying “Hey!” while throwing both hands in the air, one way to amplify it would be to say “Hey-hey!” while also amplifying the gesture physically.

What does it mean to amplify the feeling, image, or role?

As you practice Amplification, you may find your SMI is naturally expressing a certain emotion (e.g. anger), image/picture (e.g., pulling on a rope, or a rushing waterfall), or role/character (e.g. a princess, an old man, a blue whale). Rather than focus on specific aspects of voice or body language, you can choose to amplify the feeling, image, or role itself. Doing so will tend to naturally evoke multiple simultaneous dimensions of voice and body language amplification—e.g., if you're amplifying the character of a giant, you may find your body opening and expanding in size, while you begin to use more of the space; you may also slow down while getting louder. (*See Role Amplification, below, for more on working with roles.*)

Feedback/coaching

When offering feedback and coaching for another's Amplification, the witness and/or audience can be helpful by starting with positives, sharing their own experience, and providing suggestions to improve:

Positive feedback. What did you like, what was working well? What moments stood out as particularly enjoyable or memorable?

Sharing one's own experience. What else did you experience as a witness? How were you affected emotionally/viscerally? What images or associations did you have watching the exercise?

Coaching. How might the improviser improve? For example:

Variety/range. Was there a variety or range in: the kinds of sound/movement impulses they had, the parts of the body they used (don't forget the face!), the vocal qualities they explored, the kinds of amplification they used, and the number of times they tended to amplify each impulse? It can be very useful feedback, for example, to hear that I varied my volume by not my pitch.

Stretching. Did the improviser play it safe, or did they push the limits of their vocal/physical range? If they tended to keep things small or predictable, it can be a useful exercise to go back in and do Amplification again, but this time start with one simple small SMI, and then keep amplifying it, going way beyond what one would normally do (go at least 3 iterations beyond when the improviser would normally stop).

Other aspects. If appropriate, also give feedback on the improviser's pacing (was the whole thing very fast or very slow?), and their level of tension or relaxation (if the improviser was tense, it can be useful to do the exercise again with the goal of remaining completely relaxed throughout).

Amplification as Meditation

One of the challenges in approaching the Amplification form is in maintaining awareness in the midst of the process. Typically, if I am worried about the structure of the exercise, or having inner questions (or inner critique) regarding whether I am doing it correctly or not, this will distance me from being truly present to my body, my voice, and the creative impulses that are arising.

Once you are familiar with Basic Amplification and have tried it a few times, see what happens if you approach it with these added guidelines:

Let go. Do not worry whether you are doing it right or wrong. Let go of mistakes—assume everything you are doing, even the accidents or mishaps, are perfect and there for a reason. Let go of this being a performance. You are doing this for yourself, in a process of exploration, and your witness is simply the container for the process. Let go of entertaining them.

Slow down. Don't rush this. Fully explore the sound and movement impulse through the amplification, noticing each molecule of what you are doing: be mindful. See what happens if you return to complete neutral and wait for an authentic SMI—it might take several seconds. Then there may be a slight body movement as the weight shifts, or your shoulders relax, or the muscles in your face release. Repeat the movement, adding sound. Then amplify that.

Be a scientist. Notice where a new SMI comes from. Is it suggested by your body position, your stance? Is it something in your last facial expression or tone of voice? Is it an idea that popped into your head (“I should do something with a low-pitch voice” or “I see myself with my arms spreading out as if hugging an elephant”)? Also get curious about how you are making choices regarding the kinds of amplification you are using. Are you thinking about each one or is it more intuitive, emerging organically as the improvisation develops? (If you feel you are stuck in the head, let go—assume that your body and voice will do the “right” kind of amplification, and just follow them.)

Challenge yourself. Have you explored the outer limits of what your body and voice can really do? How high or low, for example, can the pitch of your voice go—what sounds come out after you have gone beyond your normal range? Let go of needing to sound or look good. Commit fully to each moment, tapping into every bit of expression your instrument can produce.

With these added guidelines, notice how the nature of the form changes, deepening into a vehicle for strengthening mindful and choiceless awareness—and for practicing acceptance and letting go.

Variations I: Primary Amplification

“Primary Amplification” refers to those activities in which the amplification is the focus of the action and the performer’s attention. (Later we will explore “Secondary Amplification,” in which amplification is occurring in the background.) Basic Amplification, above, is the fundamental example of Primary Amplification, but there are other possibilities:

Word Amplification

This is the same as Basic Amplification, but instead of a sound/movement impulse (SMI), the improviser has a “word/movement impulse”—that is, moving while speaking a word (or short phrase).

Note that the word may or may not have anything to do with what is happening in the moment. It's just a word chosen in the moment. Also, the way the word is amplified may or may not be congruent (match the meaning of the word).

For example, I might have an impulse to do a little leap while saying "tired." I could then amplify the impulse by leaping higher and saying "Tired" louder and with more energy. After a few more iterations I might be jumping quite high and yelling "TIIIRRED!!!"

For an intermediate step between Basic and Word Amplification, try doing Amplification with gibberish (nonsense words).

Role Amplification

In this variation, instead of an SMI, the improviser identifies a role impulse, and amplifies that. A role impulse can be any kind of role or character, preferably suggested by something already occurring in the present moment (e.g., bodily position, facial expression, vocal quality, emotion or mood) as opposed to thinking something up or being clever. A role need not be a person—it can also be an animal, object (e.g., a talking clock), or fantastic/mythical creature (e.g., god/goddess, monster, etc.). Roles may or may not speak recognizable words.

Once the role is established, the aim of the improviser is to amplify the role. This can be done by amplifying the voice and body in some way, or by amplifying some essential emotional or energetic quality of the role. For example, an "angry dragon" might become more angry and incinerate the populous; a slow, serious butler might become even more dry and deliberate.

As with Basic Amplification, the improviser can drop the role anytime (briefly returning to neutral), and also begin a new role anytime.

Amplification Duet/Trio

Any of the above types of Amplification can also be explored with a partner or partners as a group improvisation. Amplification Duets and Trios are enjoyable and satisfying improvisational structures, especially in a workshop setting. A few tips:

Listen and create space. Working with others, remember that you are not the only one on stage. How can you open to what they are doing, really hear and/or see them, and also create enough space in what you are doing so they can be heard and sometimes have the focus? Hint: Use the option of “returning to neutral” to create space. You can also use more quiet forms of Amplification—rather than a sound getting louder, it can get softer, more focused, with longer pauses in between iterations, for example.

Invite interaction. Look for ways to work with your partner(s) and what they are doing. Eye contact and physical contact are possible. Also look for ways to weave sounds and movements together, by mirroring or contrasting the other(s).

Stay true to your own impulse. Although you are interacting with the other(s) and giving them space, do not let yourself be overly influenced by their sounds and movements. If you find yourself mirroring them habitually, return to your own authentic impulse and follow it.

After each pair or trio performs, make sure to elicit audience response: What did you like? What moments stood out? What worked or could have been better about the interaction?

Amplification Dialogue

This is a different form of Amplification Duet. In the Amplification Dialogue (see also the warm-up version of this exercise described earlier), the two improvisers begin facing one another. If used as a performance structure, they can also “cheat out”—angle their bodies outward toward the audience, or stand side-by-side and experiment with using peripheral vision to take the other in. One begins with an SMI. The other has a choice: to mirror and amplify that impulse, or have a brand new SMI. Impulses bounce back and forth in this way, sometimes amplifying a great deal—over several iterations—or sometimes being dropped and a new impulse beginning.

It is important that any new SMI be distinct enough from the last one so the other improviser is aware of the change. Also, when amplifying an impulse over several iterations, skillful improvisers are aware of *how* the impulse is being amplified, to take it further in that direction (e.g. if my partner stretched my SMI out, when it’s my turn again I’d want to stretch it out even more—rather than make it louder/faster). Finally, don’t forget to amplify your partner’s facial expression, as well as their body and voice.

You can also try this exercise as a trio, quartet, or group improvisation in a line: the impulse starts at one end, and is amplified by each person in turn. You can take turns providing the initial impulse (for a bigger group), or just improvise (in a trio/quartet).

Finally, by combining several different Primary Amplification exercises, you can create a performance score. For example, try Amplification Dialogue with a friend, beginning with sound/movement impulses, and gradually progressing to gibberish, then words, and then roles speaking complete sentences.

Variations II: Secondary Amplification

Secondary Amplification describes those exercises in which the amplification process is a secondary focus—that is, in the background or “behind the scenes.” In the foreground the actor has a different task, such as delivering a monologue, or acting in a scene. But underneath, the actor is doing the amplification process, amplifying sounds, gestures, facial expressions, movement, etc., in a variety of ways.

The result is a funhouse mirror, surreal performance, in which ordinary physical and vocal expressions stretch and distort, becoming dreamlike, nightmarish, or funny in an absurd way. Characters range from eccentric to insane.

Secondary Amplification, done well, offers a window into the inner state of the performer, amplifying hidden feelings. The actor’s inner playwright is unleashed: simultaneously informed and distracted by the amplification of voice and body, the part of the mind that is usually busy censoring language is preoccupied, allowing an unfiltered flow of thoughts and feelings. For this reason, Secondary Amplification can be valuable when developing new material.

Working this way is more challenging than in the simpler Primary Amplification forms: one’s focus is divided, having more than one task to accomplish. Consequently, Secondary Amplification exercises are advanced practices for developing self-awareness. As an actor, when I normally deliver a monologue or act in a scene, I’m not usually so acutely aware of what my body, face, and voice are doing. In Secondary Amplification I am challenged to apply the three kinds of awareness discussed throughout this book:

Mindfulness. How do I return to an awareness of my body—and of my voice—in the present moment? How can I be mindful when my focus is split? How do I accept what is happening moment by moment? How can I slow down, relax, and breathe?

Choicelessness. Can I open to subtleties—how my posture has slightly shifted, or how the corner of my mouth feels like it’s drooping downward—so that I can amplify those details? Am I giving more focus to one element than another—can I open my awareness to what’s been neglected?

Lovingkindness. Can I feel the joy of the process, to let go and have fun with it? Can I send myself *metta* throughout the process, being compassionate if I don’t get it “right” the first (or the tenth) time?

Amplified Monologue

The most basic form of Secondary Amplification is the Amplified Monologue. The actor enters the space and begins to deliver an improvised monologue to the audience. In the background, the actor practices Amplification—noticing what her voice and body are doing and amplifying those sound/movement impulses.

Here’s an example—the first few lines of an Amplified Monologue, along with what the actor did vocally and physically:

Content	Vocal Amplification	Physical Amplification
“Hello, I’d like to talk with you today about cheese.”	Speech slows down and lowers in pitch as if a tape player is beginning to grind to a halt.	Head begins to drop forward as shoulders hunch up.
“Cheese is my favorite food. Without it I’m nothing.”	Pitch has become extremely low (bass) and the pace is glacial—each word stretched out more and more. The lips have become rubbery, giving the sound an additional slurred and hollow quality.	Head is now facing the floor. Shoulders continue to tense, as well as arms and hands, which form fists and begin to rise.
“So, for me, a visit to the dairy aisle at the supermarket is a real joy.”	This line begins by dropping the previous amplification and returning to a neutral tone and speed of voice. However, by the end of the sentence, the delivery is beginning to subtly speed up beyond the normal.	Arms drop to sides, shoulders relax, and head rises—the actor once again makes eye contact with the audience. By the end of the line, the actor is rising slightly onto their toes.
“In fact I often bring my own crackers with me.”	Now the speed is noticeably quick, and high energy.	Higher on toes, back arched, arms half-open, crossing the space, and generally looking up, with an excited facial expression.
“The desire is too strong—I must have some—now!”	Speed and volume increase and climax on the final word.	The vertical quality continues as actor goes higher on toes. Arms spread out fully as face also expands, eyes and mouth wide open.

A few tips when trying the Amplified Monologue exercise:

Enter empty; be flexible. Find the topic as you go. Start with nothing and allow a first line to come to you on the spot. What emerges may be a story, true or fictional, a speech, an advertisement, a poem, stream of consciousness, etc. Allow it to change; do

not be attached to logic or to an expectation of what the monologue needs to be about. Let yourself be surprised.

Let the amplification affect you. Not only is the physical/vocal delivery of the monologue influenced by its content, but the reverse is also true: the monologue is constantly informed and inspired by the amplification, by the feelings and emotions that emerge as the amplification moves the body and voice. For example, a certain amplified facial expression and tone of voice may make you feel a certain emotion (or feel like a certain character or role), which may then affect your word choice and subject matter. Allow this to happen. Also, allow things to take a different turn as you begin amplifying some other vocal/physical impulse. Do not feel you must be faithful to logic; things may change on a dime in this activity.

Explore your range. Your amplification may sometimes be subtle—perhaps only you are aware that it is happening—and sometimes gross, outrageous, comically exaggerated. Play with this range.

Advance the story; avoid repetition. Beware of unnecessary repetition of words, phrases, and sentences—move the storyline forward. Amplified gestures/vocal qualities may repeat (as long as they grow bigger, smaller, longer, louder, etc.), but the content of the monologue should not. (A common tendency with Amplified Monologue is to repeat the same phrase over and over again as one amplifies the sound and gesture that goes with it. One of the challenges of this exercise is to detach the part of the mind speaking the monologue from the part that is noticing vocal/physical details and amplifying them.)

Don't comment. The monologue is about something different than the amplification itself. For example, if you enter with a slight limp, and find yourself

amplifying the limp, do not speak about the limp. Talk about salad dressing, your mother, or the first man on the moon. If you ever find yourself speaking directly about the body or voice element you are amplifying, let the content of the monologue move off in a different direction.

Amplified Story

In the Amplified Story form, instead of an improvised monologue, the foreground task for the actor is to tell a personal story. As in Storytelling—coming up in the chapter of that name later in Part II—the story is chosen in advance, but how it will be told, what scenes are depicted, and where it will end, are discovered in the telling. It is useful to follow Jean-Claude van Itallie’s Storytelling guidelines (to be explored more deeply in the Storytelling chapter), including use of present tense, no “ands,” the three narrative stances, etc.

As you tell the story, do Amplification in the background. Notice how your body and voice change as you tell the story—especially as you portray various characters—and amplify those changes. Allow the amplification to affect the way the story is told; it may even influence the words that emerge from the characters’ mouths.

Amplified Story can be a useful rehearsal technique, illuminating areas where the storyteller can increase her range, or make an unexpected choice. In performance, this technique can turn a mundane story into something unexpectedly engaging and quirky, in turns dramatic, strange, and hilarious. Subtle amplifications add emotional shading to each moment; more gross amplifications turn ordinary characters into caricatures.

Amplified Scene

This is designed as an activity for two or more performers (although it's possible for one actor to attempt this, playing multiple roles). The given task is to perform an improvised scene, optionally given parameters by the audience. In the background, the performers are doing the Amplification exercise, amplifying sound and movement, as well as role and emotional, impulses. The amplification, in subtle and obvious ways, influences the behavior of the characters and how the scene unfolds. Additional tips:

Ask the audience. As in classic improv-comedy, the facilitator or performers can ask for a few suggestions from the audience before the scene begins. These can include the setting (“name a place where this scene will occur”) and key information about the characters, such as an occupation, a challenge he or she is facing, a secret one of them has, etc. (it's best not to overdo this—one or two bits of info per character should be enough for the performers to work with).

Listen more, do less. As there is more than one performer, listening and interaction are key. Part of this is providing space for the other(s) on stage—i.e., not to constantly continue amplifying what one is doing, and by doing so drown out one's partner. When in doubt, return to neutral.

Let go of the outcome. It is important to remain aware of our tendencies as performers to want to entertain, be funny, look good, etc. The most interesting results in this form occur when the actors are not trying to be clever (doing their “good ideas”), but instead are mindful of the amplification and letting it have an impact on the content and direction of the scene.

Ending. The scene ends when the facilitator or a designated participant sees a good ending and calls out “Scene!” This can also be achieved in a performance setting by having a blackout.

Other Variations

Secondary Amplification can be applied to other Insight Improvisation activities, by practicing that activity in the foreground while doing Amplification in the background. Looking ahead in Part II, several exercises in the chapters “Working with Text” and “Singing” would lend themselves well to amplification. One can also bring a conscious intention to amplify roles in the Role Stream and Scene Stream structures. I encourage you to experiment and see what works for you.

In Closing

Amplification can take us to new places. For the actor (and often the audience) it’s an invitation into a surreal world where we can let go of logic and be pushed to our creative edge.

Amplification can help those new to acting break free of assumptions formed by years of seeing naturalistic acting on film, TV, and elsewhere. Also, the idea of doing something in the background while something else is in the foreground (explored in Secondary Amplification) is useful training for working with acting concepts that fall into this category, such as being motivated by a subtext or tapping into sense-memory.

Ultimately, the purpose of Amplification is to foster three main attitudes:

1. A mindful awareness of the body and voice

2. A choiceless opening to vocal and physical impulse
3. An intention to expand our expressive range

By cultivating these attitudes, the aim is to be both fully expressed as well as creatively inspired by our own vocal/physical instrument, to learn to express our passion onstage as well as off.

References

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