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HISTORICALLY SPEAKING

If Sophocles and Arthur Miller could have collaborated on a play, what kinds of struggles would the protagonist have faced? If Mozart and Jimi Hendrix could have written a song together, what would it have sounded like? If Elizabeth Taylor could have given marriage advice to Anne Boleyn, what suggestions might she have offered?

It's fun to imagine what the most fascinating people from different periods of history might have done together or spoken about if they could have met, especially if they had common interests. Since most popular historical figures had talents and abilities unique for their time, improvising conversations and activities between famous people from different ages is a great way for an actor to explore unusual character complexities.

Of course, it's important for the players to know some facts about the historical figures they will be portraying before starting the improvisation. Have your players do a little bit of research on the people they will be portraying before beginning the scene.

Once they know enough about their characters, simply have two players take the stage or playing area. Read the scene summary aloud to both the players and the audience, and then signal the players to begin. You may impose a time limit on the scene or just allow the players to conclude the scene on their own.

All scenes should take place during the present time and in a non-specific location, rather than during the time period or setting of one of the historical figures. Also, there's no need to rationalize how or why they were brought together.

After each improvisation, you may wish to discuss the following with your players and the audience:

- Did any specific conflicts develop during the scene? If so, how were they resolved?
 - Did the historical figures speak and behave as you imagined?
 - Were any of the historical figures represented in a stereotypical fashion?
 - Did you learn anything new about the characters?
1. Marilyn Monroe (1926–1962) sings “Happy Birthday” to Abraham Lincoln (1809–1865) on his birthday.
 2. Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519) critiques Andy Warhol’s (1928–1987) artwork.
 3. Harriet Tubman (1822–1913) and Malcolm X (1925–1965) discuss their views on human rights in America.
 4. Queen Elizabeth I (1533–1603) explains to Catherine the Great (1729–1796) why she never married.
 5. Confucius (551–479 B.C.) and Karl Marx (1818–1883) share their thoughts on religion, politics, and society.
 6. Marie Antoinette (1755–1793) offers Princess Diana (1961–1997) advice on handling the press.
 7. Mahatma Gandhi (1869–1948) and Martin Luther King, Jr. (1929–1968) exchange ideas on social justice and the importance of nonviolent protest.
 8. Maya Angelou (1928–2014) and Emily Dickinson (1830–1886) write a poem together.
 9. Ludwig van Beethoven (1770–1827) gives a piano lesson to Libera (1919–1987).