

2

USING CONTRASTS

Neil Simon discovered that if you take a character who is hopelessly sloppy and have him live with a neatness fanatic, the possibilities for a play are almost endless. In fact, enough situations resulted from this combination of character types to keep *The Odd Couple* television series going for several years. Think of some popular plays, films, and television shows. How many of them involve leading characters that have diametrically opposed personalities?

The improvisation starters in this chapter provide contrasting character traits or emotions. The instructor or moderator should simply have the players take the stage, assign each one an indicated trait or emotion, and then read aloud the scene summary. Remind your players of the same rules described in chapter one, with the addition of the following: Everything you do and say should be consistent with your character's personality or emotional state, but avoid stereotypes. There is more than one way to express shyness, anxiety, frustration, elation, etc. Each person is unique; don't use clichéd means of expressing your character.

In some cases, the trait or emotion one should assign each player will be obvious. But in others, the trait or emotion can be randomly assigned. It might be fun to run some of these improvisations twice, having the players switch their traits the second time. For example, when presenting the first situation about a dance instructor teaching a new student a few basic dance steps, it would seem more sensible to characterize the dance instructor as enthusiastic and the new student as introverted, but running the improvi-

sation a second time with an introverted instructor and an enthusiastic student would certainly create an entirely different scene.

You may use the following guide questions when discussing the performances with your players and audience:

- What specific conflicts resulted from the contrasting character traits or emotions portrayed by the players?
- Did the players *talk* about their characteristics, or did they *show* they possessed them? Did you notice any specific vocal or visible adjustments that were made to communicate their characteristics?
- Did the players' traits or emotions seem honest and natural, or were they contrived?
- Did the improvisation develop as you expected, or were you surprised by the direction in which it turned?

As in chapter one, most of the situations do not require gender-specific characters. Feel free to switch male references to female and female references to male.

Note: It might be a good idea to have a dictionary handy while running these improvisations. Dictionary definitions of the words assigned to the players may provide nuances that could help the players develop more specific objectives and motivations.

Two Players

1. ENTHUSIASTIC/INTROVERTED

A dance instructor teaches a new student a few basic dance steps.

2. ACTIVE/INACTIVE

A runner encourages a friend to go for a run with him.

3. OPTIMISTIC/PESSIMISTIC

Two friends buy lottery tickets at a convenience store.

4. IMPASSIONED/BEWILDERED

A psychic reader warns a client about a danger lurking in his future.