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IMPROVISATION IN MUSICAL THEATRE

By ANNIE DRAGOO

Understanding basic improvisation skills will help musical theatre performers understand that musical theatre is more than just singing and dancing. It's about using all the tools (voice, body, and mind) an actor has at their disposal to create a character.

This unit focuses more on the improv aspect rather than the musical theatre aspects - in fact students need no prior musical theatre knowledge. Annie Dragoo, creator of the unit, uses this material as her first unit in her musical theatre class. It's a great introduction and will get your students in the right frame of mind to approach musical theatre.

The lessons explore a variety of improv skills such as vocal responses, movement, character study, sensory awareness and culminate in an improv scene and unit essay.

1 - Intro to Improv for Musical Theatre

Students will demonstrate an understanding of improv guidelines by using them in an exercise. This is an introductory improv lesson that is designed to build upon the actors' tools in future lessons.

2 - Improv with Vocal Responses

Students will demonstrate ability to respond vocally by participating in various improvisation activities.

3 - Improv with Movement

Students will demonstrate ability to improvise movement by participating in a various activities.

4 - Improv for Character Study

Students will demonstrate ability to develop a character by participating in various improvisation exercises.

5 - Improv Using Sensory Awareness

Students will demonstrate sensory awareness by improvising an everyday activity while paying attention to as many sensory details as possible.

6 - Improvisation Scenes

Students will demonstrate ability to use voice, body, and imagination/mind together by planning and performing an improvised scene.

7 - Unit Reflection (Essay)

Students will evaluate the value of improvisation in musical theatre by writing a five-paragraph essay.

Standards Connections

National Core Arts Standards

Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work - Grade 6

TH:Cr1.1.6.c - Explore a scripted or improvised character by imagining the given circumstances in a drama/theatre work.

Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work - Grade 7

TH:Cr1.1.7.c - Envision and describe a scripted or improvised character's inner thoughts and objectives in a drama/theatre work.

Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work - Grade 8

TH:Cr1.1.8.c - Develop a scripted or improvised character by articulating the character's inner thoughts, objectives, and motivations in a drama/theatre work.

Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work - High School Accomplished

TH:Cr1.1.HSII.c - Use personal experiences and knowledge to develop a character that is believable and authentic in a drama/theatre work.

Organize and develop artistic ideas and work - Grade 6

TH:Cr2.1.6.b - Contribute ideas and accept and incorporate the ideas of others in preparing or devising drama/theatre work.

Organize and develop artistic ideas and work - Grade 7

TH:Cr2.1.7.b - Demonstrate mutual respect for self and others and their roles in preparing or devising drama/theatre work.

Develop and refine artistic techniques and work for presentation - Grade 7

TH:Pr5.1.7.a - Participate in a variety of acting exercises and techniques that can be applied in a rehearsal or drama/theatre performance.

Develop and refine artistic techniques and work for presentation - Grade HS Accomplished

TH:Pr5.1.HSII.a - Refine a range of acting skills to build a believable and sustainable drama/theatre performance.

Refine new work through play, drama processes and theatre experiences using critical analysis and experimentation - Grade 6

TH:Cr3.1.6.b - Identify effective physical and vocal traits of characters in an improvised or scripted drama/theatre work.

Refine new work through play, drama processes and theatre experiences using critical analysis and experimentation - Grade 7

TH:Cr3.1.7.b - Develop effective physical and vocal traits of characters in an improvised or scripted drama/theatre work

Common Core

Language

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.L.1 - Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.CCRA.L.2 - Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.

Reading: Literature

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.RL.9-10.1 - Cite strong and thorough textual evidence to support analysis of what the text says explicitly as well as inferences drawn from the text.

Language

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.1 - Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English grammar and usage when writing or speaking.

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.L.9-10.2 - Demonstrate command of the conventions of standard English capitalization, punctuation, and spelling when writing.

Writing

CCSS.ELA-LITERACY.W.9-10.1 - Write arguments to support claims in an analysis of substantive topics or texts, using valid reasoning and relevant and sufficient evidence.

California VAPA Standards (2019)

6.TH:Cr1 Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work

6.TH:Cr1.b - Explore a scripted or improvised character by imagining the given circumstances in a drama/theatre work.

7.TH:Cr1 Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work

7.TH:Cr1.b - Envision and describe a scripted or improvised character's inner thoughts and objectives in a drama/theatre work.

8.TH:Cr1 Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work

8.TH:Cr1.b - Develop a scripted or improvised character by articulating the character's inner thoughts, objectives, and motivations in a drama/theatre work.

Acc.TH:Cr1 Generate and conceptualize artistic ideas and work.

Acc.TH:Cr1.b - Use personal experiences and knowledge to develop a character that is believable and authentic in a drama/theatre work.

6.TH:Cr2 Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.

6.TH:Cr2.b - Contribute ideas and accept and incorporate the ideas of others in preparing or devising drama/theatre work.

7.TH:Cr2 Organize and develop artistic ideas and work.

7.TH:Cr2.b - Demonstrate mutual respect for self and others and their roles in preparing or devising drama/theatre work.

7.TH:Pr5 Develop and refine artistic techniques and work for presentation.

7.TH:Pr5.a - Participate in a variety of acting exercises and techniques that can be applied in a rehearsal or drama/theatre performance.

Acc.TH:Pr5 Develop and refine artistic techniques and work for presentation.

Acc.TH:Pr5.a - Refine a range of acting skills to build a believable and sustainable drama/theatre performance.

6.TH:Cr3 Refine and complete artistic work.

6.TH:Cr3.b - Identify effective physical and vocal traits of characters in a drama/theatre work.

7.TH:Cr3 Refine and complete artistic work.

7.TH:Cr3.b - Develop effective physical and vocal traits of characters in an improvised or scripted drama/theatre work.

Florida Sunshine State Standards

Critical Thinking & Reflection

TH.912.C.1.2 - Create, refine, and sustain complex and believable characters for performance through the integration and application of artistic choices based on research, rehearsal, feedback, and refinement.

TH.912.C.1.5 - Make and defend conscious choices in the

creation of a character that will fulfill anticipated audience response.

TH.912.C.2.7 - Accept feedback from others, analyze it for validity, and apply suggestions appropriately to future performances or designs.

Organizational Structure

TH.912.O.1.1 - Research and analyze a dramatic text by breaking it down into its basic, structural elements to support development of a directorial concept, characterization, and design.

Skills, Techniques & Processes

TH.912.S.1.6 - Respond appropriately to directorial choices for improvised and scripted scenes.

TH.912.S.2.8 - Strengthen acting skills by engaging in theatre games and improvisations.

TH.912.S.3.2 - Exercise artistic discipline and collaboration to achieve ensemble in rehearsal and performance.

TH.912.S.3.3 - Develop acting skills and techniques in the rehearsal process.

Georgia Performance Standards - Theatre Arts

Grade 6 - Creating

TA6.CR.1 - Organize, design, and refine theatrical work., a. Identify artistic choices, utilize theatre vocabulary, and demonstrate non-verbal communication skills in the rehearsal process., b. Interpret a character's motivation by understanding the relationship between their background and their behavior., c. Identify the variety of relationships between characters., d. Identify, define, and classify character traits., e. Recognize and demonstrate the roles, responsibilities, and skills associated with collaborative performance., f. Use resources to identify and create technical elements of theatre.

Grade 6 - Performing

TA6.PR.1 - Act by communicating and sustaining roles in formal and informal environments., a. Demonstrate effective verbal and non-verbal communication skills (e.g. rate, pitch, volume, inflection, posture, facial expression, physical movement), b. Execute character creation in a performance., c. Demonstrate a variety of types of theatre performances.

Grade 7 - Performing

TA7.PR.1 - Act by communicating and sustaining roles in formal and informal environments., a. Execute effective verbal and non-verbal communication skills in performance (e.g. rate, pitch, volume, inflection, posture, facial expression, physical movement), b. Participate in a variety of acting exercises and techniques that can be applied in a rehearsal or theatre performance., c. Engage in various performance styles.

Grades 9-12 - ACTING LEVELS I-IV - Performing

TAHSA.PR.1 - Act and direct by communicating and sustaining roles within a variety of situations and environments., a. Examine and implement the voice, body, observation, and imagination as tools of the actor in presentations of formal and informal theatre., b. Research and assess the development of acting skills for character creation and performance including historical movements, personal experience, and cultural influences., c. Act by developing, communicating, and sustaining roles within a variety of situations and environments., d. Identify and examine the responsibilities and tasks of an actor in relationship with directors, designers, and technical crew., e. Use the skills and tools of a director to conduct rehearsals for performance.

Grades 9-12 - ADVANCED DRAMA LEVELS I-IV -Performing

TAHSAD.PR.1 - Act and direct by communicating and sustaining roles within a variety of situations and environments., a. Examine and implement the skills and tasks associated with acting, incorporating voice, body, observation, and imagination to create characters for formal and informal performances., b. Implement the duties of the stage manager, including communication and safety procedures, that will assist the director in all areas of production., c. Develop a schedule and organizational plan to prepare a scene for performance, including a rehearsal schedule and a prompt script., d. Conduct rehearsals and present a full theatrical presentation to a live audience.

Grades 9-12 - MUSICAL THEATRE LEVELS I-IV - Creating

TAHSMT.CR.1 - Organize, design, and refine theatrical work., a. Analyze various theories of dramatic structure in a musical and explain how text, music, and movement can be used to advance the plot of a musical., b. Engage in and apply meaningful cultural, literary, and historical research to support formal or informal theatrical performance.

Grades 9-12 - MUSICAL THEATRE LEVELS I-IV - Performing

TAHSMT.PR.1 - Act and direct by communicating and sustaining roles within a variety of situations and environments., a. Examine and implement the skills and tasks associated with acting, singing, and dancing, incorporating vocal and movement technique, observation, and imagination to create characters for formal and informal performances., b. Identify and examine the responsibilities and tasks of an actor in relation to directors, designers, choreographers, technical crew, and production staff., c. Use the skills and tools of a director to develop a presentation of formal and informal musical theatre performances., d. Conduct rehearsals to present a musical theatre performance for a live audience.

North Carolina Essential Standards

Beginning High School Standards - Communication

B.C.1.1 - Use non-verbal expression to illustrate how human emotion affects the body and is conveyed through the body.

B.C.1.2 - Apply vocal elements of volume, pitch, rate, tone, articulation, and vocal expression.

B.C.2.1 - Use improvisation and acting skills, such as observation, concentration, and characterization in a variety of theatre exercises.

Proficient High School Standards - Communication

P.C.1.2 - Apply vocal elements of volume, pitch, rate, tone, articulation, and vocal expression to develop characters.

Texas Essential Knowledge and Skills for Theatre Arts

MS 117.211 LI - Foundations: Inquiry and Understanding

C.1.D - develop an understanding of the mechanisms of vocal production.

C.1.E - identify theatrical vocabulary and terminology, including basic anatomy of theatre spaces.

MS 117.211 LI - Creative Expression: performance

C.2.F - create environments, characters, and actions.

MS 117.212 LII - Foundations: Inquiry and Understanding

B.1.E - demonstrate knowledge of theatrical vocabulary and

terminology.

MS 117.212 LII - Creative Expression: performance

- B.2.A - demonstrate safe use of the voice and body.
- B.2.G - create improvised scenes that include setting, character, and plot.

MS 117.213 LIII - Foundations: Inquiry and Understanding

- B.1.B - explore preparation and warm-up techniques.
- B.1.E - apply knowledge of theatrical vocabulary and terminology.

MS 117.213 LIII - Creative Expression: performance

- B.2.A - demonstrate safe use of the voice and body.
- B.2.C - create characters, dialogue, and actions that reflect dramatic structure in improvised and scripted scenes, individually and collaboratively.

HS 117.315 LI - Foundations: Inquiry and Understanding

- C.1.J - identify the principles of improvisation.

HS 117.315 LI - Creative Expression: performance

- C.2.A - demonstrate safe use of the voice and body.
- C.2.C - employ effective voice and diction to express thoughts and feelings.
- C.2.E - employ physical techniques consistently to express thoughts, feelings, and actions non-verbally.

HS 117.316 LII - Foundations: Inquiry and Understanding

- C.1.A - develop and practice theatre warm-up techniques.
- C.1.C - demonstrate effective voice and diction.

HS 117.317 LIII - Foundations: Inquiry and Understanding

- C.1.A - apply theatre preparation and warm-up techniques effectively.
- C.1.B - experiment with stage movement.
- C.1.C - distinguish the proper techniques such as diction, inflection, and projection in the use of voice.

HS 117.317 LIII - Creative Expression: performance

- C.2.D - experiment with improvisation and scripted scenes of various styles to portray believable characters.

Alberta, Canada

Improvisation Drama 10

- 1 - use warmup techniques for preparation of body, voice and mind
- 10 - demonstrate appropriate rehearsal methods
- 16 - make logical choices spontaneously within the boundaries of situation and character
- 17 - demonstrate the ability to accept, advance, offer or block thought and action, quickly and effectively
- 20 - critique the work of self and others through observation and expression of specific detail
- 24 - select and use vocal techniques appropriate to a character
- 3 - maintain concentration during exercises
- 32 - sustain a character throughout a scene or exercise
- 8 - tell a story spontaneously

Improvisation Drama 20

- 34 - demonstrate the techniques of sharing, giving and taking focus
- 36 - integrate improvisational skills learned, in planned and spontaneous improvisations

Acting Drama 20

- 5 - demonstrate a character's main objective within a scene
- 6 - demonstrate a character's immediate or moment-to-moment objectives within a scene

Movement Drama 10

- 3 - recognize the necessity for physical warmups
- 4 - perform a physical warmup
- 5 - demonstrate effective breathing techniques

Improvisation/Acting Level III - Advanced

- 26 - pick up cues effectively

Junior Goal II Objectives

- develop the body and voice as tools of communication

Junior Goal III Objectives

- develop awareness of drama and theatre presentations as possible

Junior Orientation

- demonstrate a willingness to take calculated and reasonable risks
- demonstrate trust by becoming comfortable, physically and emotionally, with others
- listen effectively
- offer and accept constructive criticism, given specific guidelines, with a desire to improve
- share ideas confidently with others
- support positivity the work of others

Movement Level I - Beginning

- 3 - use physical relaxation techniques effectively
- 4 - recognize the need for and demonstrate warmup activities
- 7 - demonstrate awareness of his or her own body and its movement potential

Improvisation/Acting Level I - Beginning

- 1 - use warm-up techniques for preparation of body, voice and mind
- 12 - make logical choices within the boundaries of situation and character
- 2 - respond to directions without breaking concentration-side coaching
- 5 - create and tell a story spontaneously
- 7 - use stage vocabulary: stage areas, body positions and crosses
- 8 - demonstrate appropriate rehearsal behaviours and routines
- 9 - communicate a clear beginning, middle and end in spontaneous and planned scenes

Improvisation/Acting Level II - Intermediate

- 13 - recognize the techniques of offering, accepting, advancing and blocking
- 18 - use voice variety to enhance a character
- 21 - sustain a character throughout an exercise or scene
- 24 - recognize that relationships exist between characters in given situations

Junior Goal I Objectives

- develop a positive self-image
- develop self-confidence
- develop self-discipline
- develop the willingness to make a decision, act upon it and accept the results
- explore and develop physical and vocal capabilities
- extend the ability to explore, control and express emotions

extend the ability to think imaginatively and creatively
strengthen powers of concentration

Senior Goal I Objectives

apply imaginative and creative thought to problem-solving situations

extend physical and vocal capabilities
extend the ability to concentrate
increase self-confidence
increase self-discipline

Senior Goal II Objectives

be capable of creating and expressing a believable character from scripted and non-scripted material
develop the ability to select appropriate physical and vocal expression for feelings, ideas and images

Orientation Drama 10

demonstrate self-discipline, self-direction and a sense of responsibility
listen to self and others
share ideas confidently
work cooperatively and productively

British Columbia (2018)

GRADE 6 - ARTS - Exploring and creating

Create artistic works collaboratively and as an individual using ideas inspired by imagination, inquiry, experimentation, and purposeful play

Intentionally select and apply materials, movements, technologies, environments, tools, and techniques by combining and arranging artistic elements, processes, and principles in art making

GRADE 6 - ARTS - Communicating and documenting

Express, feelings, ideas, and experiences through the arts
Take creative risks to express feelings, ideas, and experiences

GRADE 7 - ARTS - Exploring and creating

Create artistic works collaboratively and as an individual using ideas inspired by imagination, inquiry, experimentation, and purposeful play

Intentionally select and apply materials, movements, technologies, environments, tools, and techniques by combining and arranging artistic elements, processes, and principles in art making

GRADE 7 - ARTS - Communicating and documenting

Express, feelings, ideas, and experiences through the arts
Take creative risks to express feelings, ideas, and experiences

GRADE 8 - ARTS - Exploring and creating

Create artistic works collaboratively and as an individual using ideas inspired by imagination, inquiry, experimentation, and purposeful play

Intentionally select and apply materials, movements, technologies, environments, tools, and techniques by combining and arranging artistic elements, processes, and principles in art making

GRADE 8 - ARTS - Communicating and documenting

Take creative risks to express feelings, ideas, and experiences

GRADE 9 - DRAMA - Exploring and creating

Create dramatic works both collaboratively and as an individual, using ideas inspired by imagination, inquiry, and purposeful play

Select and combine dramatic elements and principles to intentionally create a particular mood, effect, and meaning

Take creative risks to experience and express thoughts, emotions, and meaning

GRADE 9 - DRAMA - Connecting and expanding

Collaborate through reciprocal relationships during creative processes

Demonstrate respect for themselves, others, and the audience

GRADE 10 - DRAMA - Explore and Create

Develop a repertoire of dramatic skills and techniques through presentation or performance

Develop performance skills in a variety of contexts

Improvise and take creative risks to express meaning

GRADE 10 - DRAMA - Connect and expand

Demonstrate respect for self, others, and the audience

GRADE 11 - DRAMA - Explore and Create

Develop a repertoire of dramatic skills and techniques through presentation or performance

Develop and refine performance skills in a variety of contexts

Improvise and take creative risks using imagination, exploration, and inquiry

GRADE 11 - DRAMA - Reason and reflect

Demonstrate awareness of self, others, and audience

GRADE 11 - DRAMA - Connect and expand

Demonstrate awareness of self, others, and audience

GRADE 12 - DRAMA - Explore and Create

Develop a repertoire of dramatic skills, vocabulary, and techniques through presentation or performance

Develop and refine performance skills in a variety of contexts

Improvise and take creative risks using imagination, exploration, and inquiry

GRADE 12 - DRAMA - Connect and expand

Demonstrate respect for self, others, and audience

Virginia Standards Of Learning (2020)

Theatre Arts I: Introduction to Theatre

TI.5 - The student will apply communication and collaboration skills for theatre experiences.

Theatre Arts I: Introduction to Theatre

TI.11 - The student will analyze how music, visual art, and dance arts enhance performances.

Theatre Arts I: Introduction to Theatre

TI.12 - The student will refine physical and vocal techniques for theatre performance

Theatre Arts I: Introduction to Theatre

TI.2 - The student will apply a creative process for theatre.