Spare Scenes
60 Skeletal Scenes
for Acting and Directing

Diane Timmerman

Heinemann
Portsmouth, NH
For Asher, who proves everyday  
that amazing things come in small packages
Contents

Acknowledgments vii
Introduction ix
Exercises for the Acting Classroom xiii
Exercises for the Directing Classroom xxi
Short Scenes 1–30 1
Longer Scenes 31–60 63
Acknowledgments

Every acting and directing teacher I know steals like a thief and I am no exception. I believe the unwritten agreement is that as long as you acknowledge what has come before you are free to use it. At least, I hope that’s the agreement. In any case, I’d like to thank my teachers Howard Jensen, Dale McFadden, and Bruce Burgun at Indiana University and, even more years ago, Kyle Donnelly and Eileen Vorbach at the Actors’ Center in Chicago. The Actors’ Center work and that of Bruce was influenced by Edward-Kaye Martin and the great Sanford Meisner. I would also like to thank Robert Cohen for originating the idea of contentless scenes in his book, Acting Power.

I thank Dan Barden for providing me with abundant examples of clean, powerful writing, David Mold for lending his editorial insight, and my parents for teaching me about unconditional generosity. Thanks, too, to Owen Schaub, John Green, and Peter Alexander for making coming to work so much fun.

I also thank Kristin Linklater, Andrea Haring, Trudie Kessler, Christine Adaire, Louis Colaianni, and all of my 2003 Designated Linklater voice instructor buddies for teaching me that speaking the truth is one of life’s beautiful experiences.

For the last decade my students at Butler University have been my teachers. They have taught me how to teach. Over the years, they have created such life from spare words the likes I have never seen. The words on these pages are no doubt part of the indelible memory their performances have etched on my heart.

Everyone in theatre knows that part of the journey is getting back to the freedom of childhood. Every parent knows the potency of a child’s words, the power of a few syllables screamed or cried or cooed or whispered. The urgency, purity, abandon, and passion of my children, Charis, Barek, and Asher, energize each word I write,
each role I act, each play I direct. Perhaps even more amazing is the way my husband, Steve Webb, manages to retain the wildness of childhood while doing all the adult things he does. My family teaches me every day and for that I am profoundly grateful.
Introduction

Why write a book of scenes about nothing—scenes that have no specific place, content, or characters? I needed these open scenes—desperately—for class. How do you teach that acting is about relationships, behavior, and interactions between people? How do you teach that, although language is of paramount importance, in contemporary theatre what is happening underneath and inside and alongside the lines is what makes the performance? How do you unchain actors from the notion that learning the lines is the big deal when you know the big deal is something much deeper? How do you coax sensuality, surprise, delight, anguish, cruelty, and passion out of actors who sometimes can't access those feelings when fettered with circumstance-laden words on a page that set up preconceived notions of how it all “should be”?

For me, I take away the words. Starting in silence, actors create relationships. Slowly, words are added through improvisation. Ultimately scripted dialogue is used, but when that day comes, it helps if those words are spare. Minimalist language forces actors to make specific decisions about character, relationship, and action because these ideas are not given in the text. The interaction between actors becomes the focal point because the words they are saying are seemingly insignificant. Open scenes underscore the importance of making strong emotional, physical, and vocal choices, and living in the moment with a scene partner.

Other things come later, of course. The visceral and intellectual importance of heightened language—even in contemporary drama—needs to be fully explored. This exploration climaxes with Shakespeare, a theatre of language, where, in fact, character, relationship, and action reside in the words. Undeniably, text is a vital component of most types of theatre. But I have found it useful to step back from language, allowing other aspects of performance to
rise to prominence. Because the words of the scenes in this book have relatively little value in and of themselves, the relationships created by the actors and the spontaneous moments between them take the focus. With small words and huge choices, an actor can discover what it means to act.

How then to use these scenes? The simple answer is: however you like! They can be used for a variety of acting and directing exercises and performances that demonstrate giving and receiving action, creating bold acting choices, developing the physical life of a character, creating relationships, environments, tone, and emphasis. There are countless ways to incorporate Spare Scenes into the classroom, and many teachers will already know how they wish to utilize the scenes. Some teachers may want to assign several pairs in a class the same scene, with each pair creating different relationships, circumstances, and environments that evolve over the course of several weeks. Others may want to use the scenes for cold readings in order to strengthen the actors’ ability to make bold relationship and action choices in the moment. Still others may want to use these scenes as a tool to support work on scenes from full-length plays by having the actors use the skeletal dialogue for improv-like scenes that explore and develop the characters, relationships, and given circumstances of the play. The scenes might also be used in beginning voice and speech classes, where students are developing the ability to speak with their own voice in connection to a text. As the students’ voices develop in range and power, the circumstances of the scenes can be heightened in order to serve as vehicles for expanding vocal capabilities.

A word about the language of Spare Scenes: I have purposely pared down punctuation to a minimum, with commas, question marks, and ellipses added only when absolutely necessary and exclamation points completely eschewed. Because the point of these scenes is to allow for maximum interpretation, it is understood—encouraged, even—that in performance these scenes will take on whatever punctuation the circumstances and relationship dictate, regardless of what appears or does not appear on the page. The same holds true for pacing: I have not included any pauses in the text, but if and when a moment calls for a pause or silence, the actors should feel free to take the time they need. The scenes can be played at a rapid-fire pace, but it is also valuable to slow them down, either in their entirety or for a section. The actors can experiment with allow-
ing the scenes to breathe, speaking only when they have a genuine impulse to communicate. It is also worth noting that although conflict is inherent in most of the scenes, each can also be played with positive objectives and circumstances.

In order to help teachers get the most out of these scenes, I have provided acting and directing exercises on the following pages. These exercises can serve as a supplement to other acting textbooks and classroom activities. The exercises are as skeletally designed as the scenes themselves, and teachers should feel free to improvise with them in whatever way they find most useful.
Exercises for the Acting Classroom

Each of the steps below will take from 20 minutes to several class sessions to accomplish, depending upon the size of the group. Between steps, it can be helpful to pause for feedback from the actors and the class audience about what they observed in each improvisation.

Steps 1 to 3 provide one way to create relationships, characters, and situations that can then be applied to a Spare Scene. (Other ideas for approaching the scenes are listed after Step 7.)

**STEP #1: CREATING A RELATIONSHIP FOR USE IN A SPARE SCENE**

* Acting partners choose a relationship
  ° Pick a relationship with a lot at stake: couples, best friends, roommates, siblings, or, if there is age diversity in the class, parent/child.

* Acting partners build the relationship
  ° Off on their own, partners discuss the facts of their relationship: how long they have known each other and how they met if they are not family, what their family is like if they are related.
  ° Partners converse, making it up as they go: what was the best time of their life together, what was the worst time they ever shared, and what do they do on a typical day spent together.

**STEP #2: DEVELOPING THE RELATIONSHIP THROUGH IMPROVISATION**

* Select a location for the improvisations
  ° The home of one or both of the characters works well.
XIV  •  EXERCISES FOR THE ACTING CLASSROOM

• Play a silent improv of a typical day in the life of the two characters
  ° One person is outside the agreed-upon location for the improv and one is already at the location. Nothing is up, it’s just another day, and the outside person is arriving where the other is.
  ° Actors should forgo miming or mouthing language and simply be in the space with one another, relating silently and physically as they wish. Nothing much needs to happen except for attention to one another and some eye contact.

• Play a silent improv that involves an action or objective
  ° One actor goes offstage to brainstorm with the instructor and a few class members. The group helps the actor decide what he or she could want from the other character that the inside person could not possibly anticipate. It helps if the outside character wants something of an emotional or a psychological nature rather than merely wanting physical goods. For instance, seeking comfort from the inside person has more potential than wanting to borrow twenty dollars.
  ° The action may be based on previously shared information. If both actors agreed earlier, for example, that the inside character has a gambling problem, the outside character could demand that the inside person seek help now. The outside person cannot, however, change given circumstances having to do with the inside person. For instance, suddenly deciding that the inside character’s parents were killed in a car wreck the previous week and basing an action on this newly created information is known as “playwriting.” Rewriting a partner’s history renders both actors unable to respond truthfully in the moment.
  ° Once the actor decides what she or he wants from the partner, the actors play a silent improv. The outside actor attempts to get what she or he wants from the inside actor without miming or mouthing words, only through eye contact and physicality. When the improv has gone a certain distance, the instructor asks the actors to stop, let go of
what just happened, and silently reset the scene. (Later in discussion, it is fascinating to learn how the inside person and the unknowing audience members have often understood very specifically what the outside person wants.)

• Play the same action adding language
  ° The outside person goes offstage and, when he or she is ready, enters again to get what he or she wants from the inside character. (If the silent improv has been particularly intense, the onstage person can do some jumping jacks to shake off the moment and reset themselves. The offstage person can take as much time as they like before reentering.)
  ° If either person would like to speak this time they may, but if there is nothing to say, it is best not to say anything.
  ° With as few words as possible, the offstage actor (the initiator of action) attempts to get what she or he wants from the onstage actor (the receiver of action), who responds in the moment to what is happening. Although information established in the conversational setup of the relationship may come into play, excess verbiage of all kinds is discouraged. (Asking “why,” going into long explanations, and exchanging pleasantries all get in the way of dynamic acting.)

**STEP #3: FURTHERING THE RELATIONSHIP**

• Play a new improv with the positions reversed
  ° The outside person becomes the inside person, and vice versa.
  ° Decide at what point in time this new improv will occur in relation to the previous improv. (This can be two weeks later, six months later, or whatever seems best to the actors.)
  ° If this is a new class session from Step 2, begin with a brief, silent improv where nothing is up to bring the relationship back into focus.
  ° The outside actor meets with a group and decides: What just happened to the outside character that the inside char-
acter could not possibly know about and what (therefore) does the outside person want from their partner? This gives the outside person two tasks: (1) the preparation of a large experience they have just had, and (2) the pursuing of what they want from another person. (Creating the large event is a step that may be added at a later time. Sometimes the impact of the event is so large that it overwhelms the actor and dampens the urgency of pursuing the goal. On the other hand, doing both brings into sharp focus the actor’s dilemma: big things are happening and yet one must do something.)

° With as few words as possible, the new offstage actor attempts to get what she or he wants from the new inside person, who responds in the moment to what is happening.

**STEP #4: PREPARING A SCENE FROM SPARE SCENES**

° Each pair selects or is assigned a scene from *Spare Scenes*

° Actors learn the lines by heart, forgoing particular line readings, meanings, and ideas about the words.

° In many scenes, there are indications that the pair is talking about something specific. Scene partners will need to decide whether to agree about what is being referred to ahead of time or to leave the topic open, so that one of the actors will make a specific decision privately, which will be a surprise to the other, in performance.

° Each pair decides the circumstances of the scene

° Actors decide where the scene is taking place, who will be in, who will be out, and when this scene is taking place in relation to the previous improvs the pair has done in Steps 2 and 3.

° The outside characters make choices

° Outside characters in the class can help each other brainstorm: what has just happened that the inside character could not possibly know about and what does the outside character want from the inside character that is of an unreasonable nature?
* The inside characters make choices
  ° The inside characters, who are the receivers of action and don’t have a pressing action to pursue from the outside characters, can also help each other decide their given circumstances. They may simply want to be hanging out in the agreed-upon space. Or the inside actor may want to select a physical activity to pursue. The physical activity should have a beginning, a middle, and an end, take at least five minutes to accomplish, and have some degree of difficulty in the doing of it. It helps if there is an emotional or a psychological reason why the activity needs to be accomplished right now. (Wrapping a present for an ill friend is a good physical activity; reading or doing aerobics are poorer choices.)

**STEP #5: PLAYING A SCENE FROM SPARE SCENES**

* The actors play the scene
  ° The outside character goes out to prepare while the inside character sets up and begins their physical activity.
  ° The outside character enters and when the actor who has the first line feels the impulse to speak, she or he speaks the first line.
  ° Each actor speaks their text, as memorized, in whatever way their partner and the circumstances of the scene are compelling them to speak.
  ° The rate, inflection, tone, and delivery of the lines (all things that should not be a conscious concern of the actor) are completely dependent upon what is occurring between the actors in the moment. Although not attempting this for its own sake, the delivery of these lines will often be unexpected, fresh, startling, and visceral.

**STEP #6: PREPARING THE SPARE SCENE WITH THE POSITIONS REVERSED**

* The outside person becomes the inside person, and vice versa
  ° The partners decide when this new showing of the scene
will be taking place in relation to the previous showing in Step 5.

- In some Spare Scenes, the initiator and receiver of the action are clearly delineated in the text, and switching acting roles may seem impossible. If this is the case, actors may try switching lines with one another, or using a new scene. It can be interesting, though, to keep the lines as they are, even if the words seem completely at odds with what is happening. When the initiator of action speaks what seems to be the receiver of action’s lines and vice versa, what sense there is in the dialogue can be completely reversed in an interesting way. Other times, the tension between the words on the page and the action being played becomes too overpowering, and it is best to switch lines or scenes.

- The outside characters make choices
  - Working as a group or individually, the outside characters choose something to want from the inside person. It is best if this new action is of a completely different nature than what the previous outside character wanted.

- The inside characters make choices
  - Working as a group or individually, the inside characters determine a physical activity. It is best if this activity is of a completely different nature from what the previous inside character did.

**STEP #7: PLAYING THE SCENE WITH THE POSITIONS REVERSED**

- The actors play the scene
  - The outside person goes out to prepare while the inside character sets up and begins their physical activity.
  - The outside character enters and when the actor who has the first line feels the impulse to speak, he or she speaks the first line.
  - This second showing is often even more amazing because the characters, relationship, and lines are the same, but the scene will, of course, be completely different from the first time.
The entire process outlined above can be turned on its head in many ways. Rather than developing a relationship through conversation and improvisation, as outlined in Steps 1–3, actors can build a relationship through physical improvisation or any other method an acting class is exploring. Once a relationship is established, students can select for themselves a Spare Scene that speaks to the path they are developing. Or the text of a Spare Scene could be the starting point, with the actors developing characters, relationships, and circumstances inspired by the words on the page. In some scenes, physical business is implied and that might be the starting point upon which to build a scenario. However a scene is built, it is always valuable to play the Spare Scene a second time in a way that is somehow radically different from the first showing. Achieving this difference is accomplished by changing the action of one or both actors, adding potent circumstances, or a combination of the two.
Exercises for the Directing Classroom

What a director actually does can be a difficult thing for new directors, actors, audiences, and even critics to determine. By keeping two variables constant—the actors and the words—the illusive role of the director can be illuminated through a variety of exercises with *Spare Scenes*.

**STEP #1: THE DIRECTOR BUILDS A SCENE**

- The director selects a scene from *Spare Scenes* and casts roles A and B
  - Actors learn lines by heart, forgoing particular line readings.
- The director and actors build a relationship between A and B
  - Directors can use relationship-building techniques listed in the acting exercises or those of their own choosing.
- The director sets up the given circumstances of the scene
  - Directors decide location of scene and which character is out and which is in.
  - Directors decide what the outside character wants from the inside character.
  - Directors decide what the inside character is doing.

**STEP #2: THE ACTORS PLAY THE SPARE SCENE**

- The actors allow the given circumstances to impact their dialogue.
STEP #3: THE DIRECTOR TACKLES THE CONCEPTUAL ISSUES OF THE SCENE

° What does the director want the audience to come away with after viewing the scene?
° How can the director achieve this result, using actor coaching, creation of environment, change of tone, pacing, or other theatrical elements?

STEP #4: THE DIRECTOR COACHES THE ACTORS IN ORDER TO ILLUMINATE THE CONCEPT

° The director coaches the actors towards performances that illuminate the ideas the director wishes to highlight.
° In class, the instructor can side-coach the director as she or he is side-coaching the actors.

STEP #3: THE DIRECTOR CREATES DIFFERENT ENVIRONMENTS

° Keeping all other variables the same (relationship, given circumstances, and intention), select a radically different environment in which the scene can take place.
° Environments can be created through the imagination only or with actual props, set pieces, and/or lighting.
° Directors can repeat this exercise, selecting a different locale for each new showing and directing the actors accordingly.

STEP #4: THE DIRECTOR VARIES THE PACE

° Keeping all other variables the same, the director coaches the actors to play the scene at varying rates. (Using imagery to describe the pace to the actors can be helpful.)

STEP #5: THE DIRECTOR ELICITS A DIFFERENT TONE

° Keeping all other variables the same, the director communicates to the actors a radically different tone in which to play the scene.
° Directors can repeat this exercise, selecting a different tone for each new showing. (It can be interesting to direct the
same scene in the manner of a suspenseful thriller, a slapstick farce, and a delicate drama.)

The process outlined above can be used in its entirety over the course of several weeks or particular steps may be used as stand-alone exercises. However, *Spare Scenes* is utilized in the directing classroom, it is valuable to direct a given scene in at least two different ways. With able actors, a director can direct the same words and people in radically different directions. Because the skeletal language does not guide the actors in ways that traditional dialogue can, the sometimes intangible director’s work can be highlighted more accurately.
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