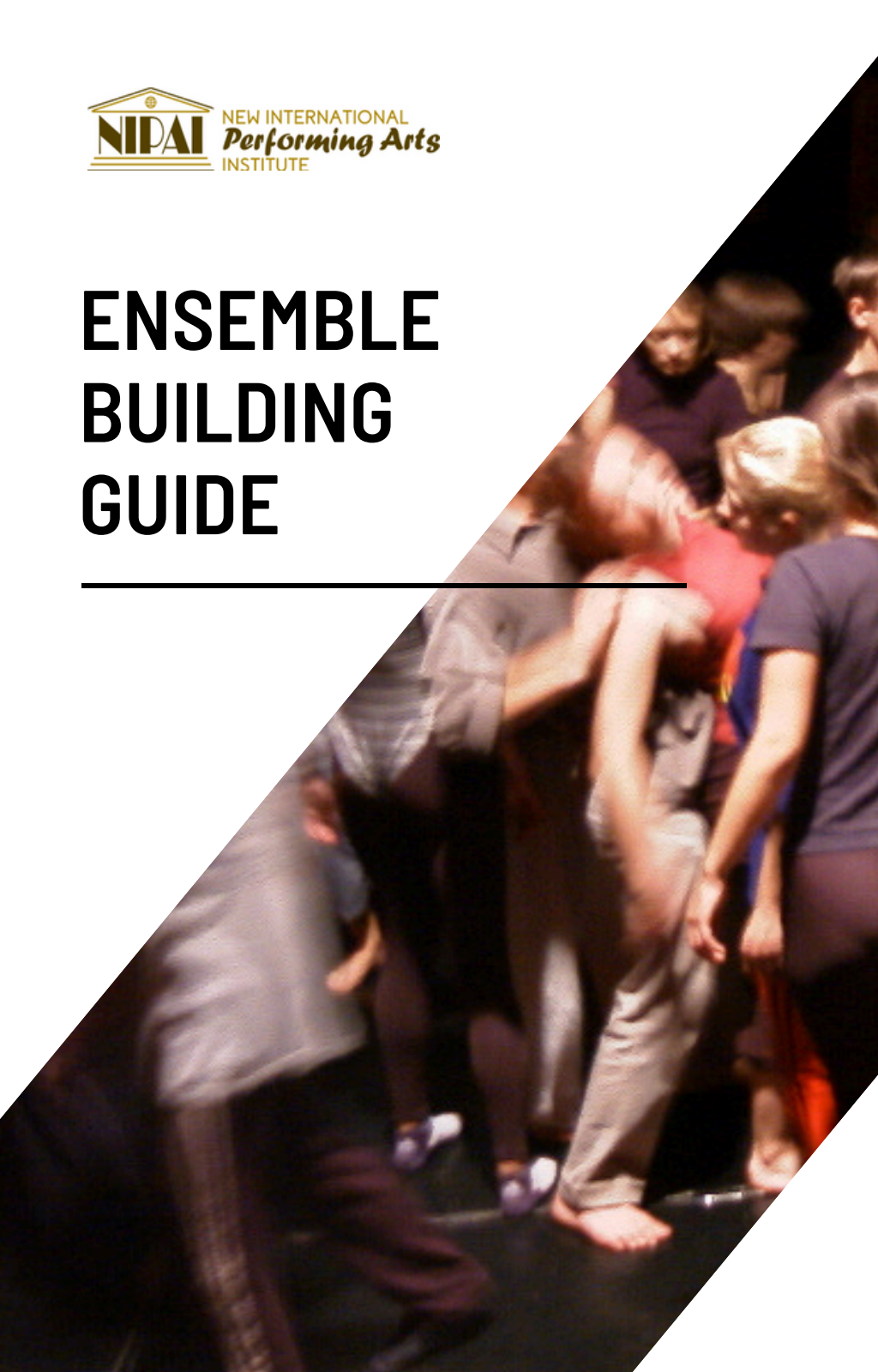


ENSEMBLE BUILDING GUIDE



In theatre, the process of group dynamics occurs regularly. While discussing group dynamics—a system of behaviors within or between social groups—might not seem relevant in a directing context, I can assure you that it is indeed beneficial for directors.

CLASSIC GROUP DYNAMICS FOUR-STAGE MODEL INCLUDES



Forming: Group members initially get along as they figure out their roles and how they fit into the group.



Storming: Group members start to drop their superficial politeness, and friction arises, sometimes leading to tempers flaring.



Norming: Group members begin to adjust to each other, developing trust and increasing productivity.



Performing: Group members work collaboratively towards a common goal.

Every group will go through all four stages, and in fact, this is a healthy process. As a director, understanding these stages will help you guide and support your cast through each one. By learning to read your actors, you can incorporate a series of warm-ups and exercises into your rehearsals. This helps prevent your cast from getting stuck in any one stage and allows them to move swiftly to the next. Your overarching goal is to create a safe and trusting environment for your ensemble so that collaboration can flow freely.

There may be excitement and eagerness; there may also be apprehension and even confusion. Some of the actors are outgoing and confident, while others may be more introverted. This is the **Forming Stage**, where your cast will spend precious energy figuring out exactly how they fit into the production.

Inevitably, you will encounter some rehearsal drama — the Storming Stage. Cast members may begin jockeying for power positions. Insecurities can cause egos to flare. Bickering and hard feelings during the Storming Stage can waste valuable rehearsal time.



Once you are able to ease through the tension of the Storming Stage, your cast and staff can finally begin to focus on the project at hand. You have entered the **Norming Stage**. At this point, actors and creative staff begin to feel secure in their roles and are learning routines. Feeling safe in their work environment, they trust each other and you, and focus on the rehearsal process. These are the goals of the Norming Stage.

The Performing Stage, when the cast and staff finally work as a whole toward the success of the project, is every director's dream. Your cast is performing at peak energy, tuned into their highest levels of imagination and creativity, and fully supporting each other. Sometimes a production never reaches this stage, and the rehearsal process becomes pure drudgery. True, the director and cast may put together a decent show, but sadly, the group never realizes its full creative potential. The goal, then, is to move as efficiently as possible through the Forming and Storming Stages, to reach the more comfortable and creative Norming and Performing Stages.

As a director, how can you gently guide and lead your actors through these stages? Is it possible?

Games and Activities for the Forming Stage – Ice Breakers, Theatre Games

Introductory Activities

The first day of rehearsal is your opportunity to establish the tone for the entire production period. Of course, you want to let your cast know that you take this project seriously, but what else?

What would you like the cast to take away from the first rehearsal that would be a great first step in building a safe and trusting environment? A sense of togetherness, a spirit of the mission, a family atmosphere?

This goal may change depending on your project or concept. Be clear about this takeaway before you meet your cast on day one.

You can incorporate a number of ice breaker activities in your first rehearsal. Depending on the size of your cast, your ice breaker could take the form of a focus game or be as simple as "Tell us your name and something unique about yourself." The ice breaker you choose may also reflect the type of production you are directing. One ice breaker theatre game is called "Back to Back," a variation of Augusto Boal's "Person to Person, Quebec-Style."

Back to Back Game

Variation #1: Everyone finds a partner and stands back to back. The director/leader calls out two body parts, and partners must touch these together (for example, "Head to Head" or "Elbow to Knee"). After three sets of instructions, the director/leader calls out "Back to Back," and everyone scrambles to find a new partner, standing back to back to begin another series.

Variation #2: This is the same as above, except that the instructions are cumulative. For instance, once a pair has put their heads together, they must keep this connection intact while figuring out how to touch an elbow to a knee.

Warm-Up Activities

Professional actors are trained to warm up on their own and will allocate time before each rehearsal for appropriate personal warm-ups. However, student or amateur actors can benefit from group warm-ups, and as a director aiming to build a collaborative environment, so can you. Carving out time in your rehearsal schedule for group warm-ups, especially early in the process, can help you observe your actors and learn about their tendencies, work habits, and attitudes. This is an ideal time to employ basic physical and vocal warm-ups, but also to integrate a few ice breakers and fun (yet purposeful) theatre games during the Forming Stage of your cast's development.

The following are two simple routines you may want to consider when leading group warm-ups in your own rehearsals. You may have additional exercises to add or replace. Customize the routines to make them your own, or change them up to keep rehearsals fresh.

Physical Warm-Up Routine

Have your actors stand in a circle in a neutral position (feet hip-distance apart, weight equally distributed, arms hanging freely, shoulders back and relaxed, chin level to the ground). Begin with the head and work down the body:

Head Rolls – Drop your chin to your chest and slowly roll your head to the right until your ear meets your right shoulder. Stop. Slowly roll your chin toward your chest and continue until your ear meets your left shoulder. Stop. Repeat this four times slowly.



***Note:** Avoid rolling your neck in a full circle as this could harm the vertebrae.*

Ear to Shoulder Stretches – From a neutral position, tilt your left ear toward your left shoulder, feeling the stretch on the right side of your neck. To enhance the stretch, slowly raise your left arm and place your left hand on the right side of your face. Do not pull on the head; instead, allow the weight of your hand to increase the stretch.

For an even deeper stretch, extend the right arm away from the body. Hold for twenty to thirty seconds for a more complete stretch, then repeat on the other side.



Note: If any part of this stretch is painful or too intense, ease off or reduce the intensity. There is nothing to be gained from experiencing pain.

Shoulder Scrunches and Rolls – From a neutral position, raise your shoulders up to your ears and hold as tightly as possible. Hold for several seconds. Release with a "Hah" sound, also releasing any excess breath. Repeat three times. Next, slowly roll your shoulders forward, up to your ears, backward, and down in a large circle. Repeat this circle three times. Then, reverse the circle and repeat three times.

Rib Isolations – From a neutral position, place your hands on the bottom of your rib cage. Keeping your entire body aligned, move only your ribs to the right, then forward, to the left, and then back, creating a slow circle. Feel a stretch in your mid and lower back. Repeat the circle four times in each direction.

Hip Rolls – From a neutral position, place your hands on your hips and bend your knees slightly. Keeping your entire body aligned, move only your hips to the right, then forward, to the left, and then back, creating a slow circle. Feel the stretch in your thighs and lower back. Repeat the circle four times in each direction.

Ankle Circles – From a neutral position, while maintaining balance on your left foot, rotate your right foot in a large circle in one direction four times, then switch directions. Repeat with your left foot, maintaining balance on your right foot.

Vocal Warmup Routine

Facial Muscles – To stretch tight muscles in the face and jaw:

1. **The Lion** – On a count of three, stick your tongue out as far as possible while making an "Ah" sound. Repeat three times.
2. **Smush Face/Open Face** – Squeeze your facial muscles together as tightly as possible and hold. Next, open your facial muscles as wide as possible, stretching your eyes and mouth open. Repeat three times.
3. **Yawning Jaw** – Drop your jaw open as if you are yawning. Massage your face and jaw muscles if they feel tight.

Open Sounds – To gently warm up the vocal cords:

Humming – Take a deep breath from the diaphragm and hum on a single note, keeping your lips closed. When you run out of air, take another breath and start humming again.



***Note:** Encourage the group to keep the humming strong, breathing as necessary and then rejoining the group. To become more aware of the vibration of their vocal cords, they should place a hand on their neck.*

Roller Coaster – Take a deep breath from the diaphragm and begin to hum on any note. Slowly slide up the vocal scale as high as possible and then slide down as low as possible. Take a breath when the air is depleted and rejoin the humming. (Note: It is helpful to lead the group with an arm gesture moving up and down, like a musical director conducting a choir.)

Isolating Sounds – To loosen up the tongue, lips, and jaw:

Emphasis on the Consonant:

- Lah – Lay – Lee – Lie – Loo – Loo
- Mah – May – Mee – Mie – Moh – Moo
- Pah – Pay – Pee – Pie – Poh – Poo
- Kah – Kay – Kee – Kie – Koh – Koo
- Nah – Nay – Nee – Nie – Noh – Noo

Consonant Placement – Notice the physical placement of these consonants and encourage a clear distinction between each:

- PPPPah (repeat with the consonants B, T, D, K, and G)

Articulation Exercises:

1. Paper Poppy – Repeat four times
2. Baby Bubble – Repeat four times
3. Topeka – Repeat eight times
4. Mommala Poppala – Repeat four times
5. Fiddle dee dee/Fiddle dee dah – Repeat four times

Tongue twisters are fun, and there are many resources available for these. However, we use tongue twisters sparingly and focus on articulation rather than speed. What we've observed is that the misuse of tongue twisters can reinforce bad habits, such as speaking too quickly and slurred speech.

Here are also some examples of voice warm-up exercises from the National Theatre:

1. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=Tc-hoG4nec>
2. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rBoOyCLICcU>
3. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=7MvIGKwLh0>
4. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uRdFtrv2yGA>

Games and Activities for the Storming Stage

As your cast moves from the Forming to the Storming Stage, you'll want to help them ease through the transition as quickly as possible. If you observe any divisiveness, incorporating trust games into the group warm-ups, after a break, or even during scene work is an effective way to build group dynamics and lead your cast toward the ultimate prize: a positive, trusting, creative environment.

Human Knot (Basic)

One effective trust game for bringing together a group of diverse individuals is the Human Knot. It's useful in many situations, including classes or workshops aimed at group bonding.

Divide your cast or group into small circles of eight to twelve members. Ask them to stand in a circle, facing inward, and cross their arms in front of them at the elbows. Next, they should step forward and grab the hand of someone across the circle, but they cannot grab the hand of the person next to them.



This is very important—repeat this instruction!

Once everyone is connected, they must disentangle without letting go of the hands they are holding until the knot is untangled. Encourage communication among group members to solve the knot. There are two possible outcomes of this exercise: the group may form one large circle or sometimes two smaller circles. Remind your groups that this challenge is solvable.

Human Knot (Variation)

The group circles begin exactly as described above, but once everyone is connected, they are not allowed to speak as they begin to disentangle. This forces participants to rely on other forms of communication, such as facial expressions and body language, to problem-solve.

Leaning-Against-Each-Other Trust Walk (Paired)

Two actors stand side by side with their shoulders touching and lean into each other. Each actor tries to keep his or her feet as far from the other person's feet as possible as the pair walks across the stage or room. A variation of this involves adding another pair to the original pair, one person on either side.

Additional Trust Exercises

These include the entire ensemble working together and are designed to encourage group bonding.

Count to Twenty

Actors stand in a tight circle, shoulder to shoulder. One actor begins by saying “One” out loud. At any point, a second actor says “Two,” and the activity continues until the group reaches twenty. However, if at any time two actors start to say a number at the same time, the group must start again at “One.” This activity requires concentration, eye contact, and trust. Once the group reaches the goal of counting to twenty, they experience a great sense of accomplishment and cohesiveness, making it an ideal exercise to use during the Storming Stage.

Continuing warm-up activities, adding trust exercises, and encouraging discussions to foster group bonding are helpful in easing an ensemble through the Storming Stage. However, remember that this stage is a normal part of the group dynamics process. Your awareness and response can hasten the effects and help move the group to the more productive Norming Stage.

Activities for the Norming Stage – Improvising within the Script

You have helped your cast glide through the Forming and Storming stages and have arrived at a sense of normalcy in the rehearsal process. At this point, you may not need many activities to build up your group.

However, your goal is to ensure that your cast is 100% comfortable with the collaborative environment. We will dive into more details about creating this environment in the coming weeks.

You aim to create a rehearsal process that encourages input, inspires creativity, and supports a collaborative, artistic vision.

A great activity at the Norming Stage in the group dynamics process is using improvisation as a rehearsal tool. For example, during one production of "Androcles and the Lion," the set was an outdoor playground. According to the script, a troupe of six Commedia dell'arte actors stumbles upon the perfect site (in this case, the playground) to perform their show. Most rehearsals were conducted in a studio until the final two weeks, which were spent on the actual playground equipment—jungle gyms, ladders, slides, huge plastic tubes, ropes, etc.

Significant portions of rehearsal time, including warm-ups, were devoted to exploring the space in a child-like manner. For instance, the actors engaged in tag, hide-and-seek, kick the can, and other childhood games on the set. We even began to incorporate some of the chase patterns and hiding spots into the blocking. This approach transformed rehearsals into a collaborative and enjoyable venture. The flexibility and use of improvisation can be extremely beneficial during the Norming Stage.

Other uses for improvisation in the Norming Stage can occur during the refining rehearsals, especially as the cast are continuing to explore characterization and character relationships. For instance, improvising a scene for fluidity and emotional connection when the actors aren't off book yet can be very helpful. Improvisations of the imaginary scene prior to the text scene you are working on can help develop character background and character relationship. If a character entrance seems unbelievable or unmotivated, a short improvisation of the moment before the entrance can be extremely helpful to make the entrance more authentic.

Finally, consider spending some rehearsal time improvising moments described by the playwright in the play that take place offstage. For example, in *The Glass Menagerie* actors could improvise a scene around Amanda's description of her visit to the business college she presumes her daughter Laura is attending. During the Norming Stage, when the cast are comfortable working as a group, improvisations can be a productive rehearsal tool.

Performing Stage

Once your cast and production team have worked through all the aspects of Forming, Storming, and Norming, they enter the desired stage of Performing. At this stage, there is little need of extra activities or exercises because your focus will be on maintaining good communication and creative collaboration.

Join us to the "The Director and Ensemble Building" 3-Month Program. Deepen your understanding, refine your techniques, and start building ensembles that not only perform but inspire.

Explore More About the Program [here](#).

In recognition of your commitment to advancing your craft, NIPAI is excited to offer a €500 grant towards your tuition if you enroll within the next 10 days.

This unique opportunity is not just about financial support—it's a gateway to transforming your approach to theater under the mentorship of seasoned professionals. At NIPAI, we don't just teach; we immerse you in a learning experience that will expand your directorial perspective and refine your ability to create compelling theater.

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