MARY SCRUGGS AND MICHAEL J. GELLMAN

PROCESS

AN IMPROVISER'S JOURNEY

"AN INDISPENSABLE GUIDE FOR TEACHERS, STUDENTS, AND ANYONE INTERESTED IN THE CREATIVE PROCESS."

—DEB LACUSTA AND DAN CASTELLANETA, WRITERS, PERFORMER, *THE SIMPSONS*

The Second City

FOREWORD BY ANNE LIBERA

Process

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An Improviser's Journey

Mary Scruggs
and
Michael J. Gellman

Foreword by
Anne Libera

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Foreword

FROM THE DAY I FIRST MET MICHAEL GELLMAN in early 1987, he has been obsessed with the goal of using improvisation to create plays. I was hired as stage manager and assistant director for a trio of one-act plays that Michael was directing at the Organic Theater's Greenhouse space. He had spent the previous several months working with a group of actor-improvisers to develop material with a set of playwrights. Coming into the project halfway through, I was impressed by the passion all involved had for the project but also a little puzzled, partially because I was interested in a different kind of theater. The eventual product just didn't seem to live up to the original excitement (although the play written by Dan Castellaneta and Deb Lacusta, one of three written during that project, was an ensemble comedy set in an office, and it featured a young Steve Carell).

When the show closed, Michael helped me get a job in the box office at The Second City and I started classes at The Second City Training Center. Michael was my first improv teacher there, and I was quickly hooked on improvisation as a performer. I was fascinated by how The Second City used improvisation to create revue sketches. While my own focus shifted to comedy and revue, Michael continued to press forward with his vision of a legitimate theater dedicated to producing plays written through improvisation. He formed and re-formed a variety of companies and created a series of shows throughout the next ten years, but none seemed to truly fulfill the promise that they showed in the beginning.

In the late 1990s, I was directing for The Second City, and Michael and I were colleagues teaching in the Training Center's Conservatory Program. Michael invited me to join a workshop for a semi-improvised long-form play called *The Quest,* which he had created based on the work of Joseph Campbell. It had been a while since I had improvised on a stage, and it sounded intriguing, so I accepted. Working with Michael on this project as a performer was challenging, frustrating, and exhilarating all at the same time, and it wasn't like any kind of improv class that I had ever taken—not even Second City classes I had taken with Michael himself. The work itself was different. It reminded me of a more accessible version of the Sanford Meisner process that we had studied in college. But it was hard to execute. In the early workshops it often seemed that Michael was a superhero who had developed a special X-ray vision that allowed him to see the essential DNA of advanced improvisational work. He couldn't always articulate what it was he was seeing—perhaps there weren't words for it—but he insisted that if you just did what he asked, worked through the exercises, that you would see it yourself. And finally, one day while I was doing a scene with Andy Cobb in a *La Ronde*–style exercise that Michael calls The Town, it all suddenly clicked into focus. I wasn't thinking; I was honestly in the moment, making discoveries, and it was so simple, so incredibly easy that it didn't seem possible that I hadn't known how to do it before. And while performing *The Quest* format was enjoyable in its own way, that moment in the workshop completely changed the way that I teach and perform improvisation.

When Michael asked Mary Scruggs to sit in on a new series of workshops he was planning with the intention of gathering material for a potential book, it made perfect sense. Mary has a unique ability to take the most ephemeral and ambiguous of concepts and give them a shape that is easily communicated and readily understood. I knew that she would be able to take Michael's unique insights and find the words to express them. And as those workshops progressed and we all discussed, pondered, and argued about the

results, it became clear to me (and to Mary, if not to Michael) that it honestly doesn't matter how, or even if, this work creates plays of literary quality. It is the process in and of itself that is worth studying and communicating to a wider audience—they will decide for themselves how best to eventually apply it.

So it is absolutely fitting that Mary Scruggs and Michael Gellman have chosen to call their book *Process* (and if you are talking with Michael, it is always pronounced prō-cess with the long *o,* a relic of the time that Michael spent in Canada). In his own quest for a product, Michael discovered a brilliant process: an active way of looking at improvisation that gives us new insight into how to act—whether within an improvised scene or a previously scripted work.

—*Anne Libera*

Preface

IT WAS 1974, AND THE CAST OF The Second City National Touring Company had a big problem: its members had difficulty improvising full-cast scenes. I was the director. One day in rehearsal we had an idea. What would happen if the entire cast of six stayed on stage and improvised for a full thirty minutes, no stops? The only two rules were that the cast members could not leave the stage—no exits, no entrances—and they had to stay in character for the full thirty minutes. Looking back, I guess, it was the sink-or-swim theory of working on group scenes.

The cast began the exercise with a single suggestion for a setting: a backyard. The first half of the exercise was improvisational chaos. Even though the actors were struggling with group scenes, they were good improvisers and had established characters, relationships, and a setting: several family members in their backyard with a few neighbors having a barbecue. It was late evening, and there was a patio upstage and a charcoal grill downstage right. After what seemed like a long time on stage, trying to force a plot or create bits of business, the cast calmed down and reached a point of quiet stillness. It was a powerful moment.

The cast spent a few moments exploring the stillness when one of the characters heard, on a radio created earlier in the scene, the announcement of John F. Kennedy's assassination. Suddenly, the characters that had been developed began to interact and relate to each other with a common focus. Actors who had been trying too hard to be funny and force choices became focused and began playing their

characters with truths they discovered in the moments of play. The cast members had exhausted their usual, performance-based bag of tricks and had an unusual opportunity to give up trying to force the play. Instead the actors were truly able to focus on the process and not the product.

The stage manager, Raul Moncada, was in the light booth and became engrossed in our experiment. He began to slowly, almost imperceptibly, dim the lights as evening fell into night. There was a red spotlight that just happened to shine precisely where the barbecue grill had been created, and so the final image of this improvised one-act play, as the lights dimmed, was of the six characters silently sitting in the backyard, deeply affected by the president's assassination, lit only by the red glow of the dying charcoals. It was riveting. The last half of this thirty-minute exercise turned out to be a very profound experience for me. A part of the American psyche had been explored in a completely improvised play that had poignancy, power, and truth. When the red light went out on that barbecue, I understood that improvisational theater could be more than what I knew it to be.

The next day I shared the experience with Del Close, my Second City director and mentor. He said, as off-handedly as if he were ordering a sandwich, "Of course, it should be possible to improvise a one-act play in the evening, transcribe it overnight, and send it off to Samuel French for publication in the morning." Then he turned to me and said, very matter-of-fact, "That will be your mission—to create improvised one-act plays of literary quality from scratch." He meant it, and I took him seriously. At that moment, Del gave me a great gift: an impossible goal.

I THINK THAT almost everyone working in the arts has a very personal story of that specific moment when they heard a piece of music or saw a painting or experienced a performance and they knew. They knew that their lives were going to be dedicated to the pursuit of their art. For me it was when I was sixteen, a sophomore

at St. Louis Park High School in Minnesota. Thanks to a Rockefeller Foundation Title III Program, my class was taken on a school outing to see the first American production of Bertolt Brecht's play *The Resistible Rise of Arturo Ui* at the Guthrie Theater, with Robin Gammell as Ui. I knew on the ride back to school that I had found my life's work. Years later I had an occasion to meet Mr. Gammell while working at KPFK radio in Los Angeles. I told him that it was his performance in *Arturo Ui* that had inspired me to adopt theater as a career. He replied, in that rich, vibrato voice of the trained actor, "Oh, my boy, I am so terribly sorry."

I told my parents about my experience at the Guthrie and my new career decision. My mother had trained as an actor and knew what a hard life a career in the theater could be. I think to discourage me, she suggested that I get a summer job at a theater to see if it was what I really wanted to do. The next day, with all the determination of an inspired youth, I walked from theater to theater in Minneapolis—including the Guthrie—applying for jobs. I was, of course, told I was too young and had no experience. I was feeling pretty dejected and began the long walk up Hennepin Avenue to catch my bus. Then at Twenty-sixth Street, out of the corner of my eye, through a storefront window, I saw a man wearing an oversized sport coat and a bowler hat rehearsing a silent-film routine. I crossed the street to find out who the guy was and what the storefront was all about. The man in the bowler was Pat Proft, who went on to write and produce *The Naked Gun* and *Hot Shots.* The storefront, fortunately for me, turned out to be a very unique comedy theater: Dudley Riggs's Brave New Workshop.

I didn't know it at the time, but the Brave New Workshop had been, since the late 1950s, a cutting-edge cabaret theater performing satire and comedy revues. For years the shows at the Brave New Workshop had been written (scripted) for the most part by four journalists who, by day, wrote for the *Minneapolis Star* and the *Minneapolis Tribune:* Mike Anthony, Dick Guindon, Irv Letofsky, and Dan Sullivan. Years later the slogan for the Brave New Work-

shop's twenty-fifth anniversary was "Twenty-five Years of Comedy, Satire, and Promiscuous Hostility."

When I walked into the storefront I was met by a man bigger than life, Dudley Riggs, owner of the Brave New Workshop. I told Mr. Riggs I was looking for a summer job in theater, and whether it was because he took pity on me or saw a diamond in the rough—or more likely, a kid who would work really cheap—he gave me a job building and installing new seating. By the end of the summer the stage manager, Scott Pollock, was leaving, and I was asked to take over his duties. I worked as the stage manager at the Brave New Workshop for the next two years . . . also the janitor, sandwich maker, intermission candy butcher, and espresso-machine repairman. I was having the time of my life.

In the summer of 1968, an actor named Ron Douglas introduced us to improvisation. Ron had just left The Second City National Touring Company to join the cast of the Brave New Workshop. He brought with him the Second City tradition of creating scenes for satirical comedy revue through cast improvisations. He began to teach beginning-level weekly workshops on improvisational theater using training methods he had learned at The Second City in Chicago. The techniques Ron used were based on Viola Spolin's book *Improvisation for the Theater* (see Suggestions for Further Reading), considered by many to be the bible for improvisational training.

Fortunately for us, not only was Douglas a great asset to the Brave New Workshop performance company, he was also a gifted teacher. He taught us how to develop theater through improvisation. The idea that the actor could have a voice and be able to dramatize that voice was a great revelation, and it was something I knew I had to pursue.

I was excited and felt that improvisation was my path, but at the same time as I was being introduced to this exciting way of working, the educational and theater community was telling me that improvisation and comedy revue were not viable forms of theater.

My professors at the University of Minnesota, along with well-established members of the theater community, would say, "Comedy revue isn't real theater, is it?" or, "Improvisation is an interesting tool for the director during rehearsals, but it will never be considered part of 'legitimate theater.' " In other words, stay away, young man, and pursue other, more legitimate paths.

I was still working as the stage manager for the Brave New Workshop, however, where we were enjoying full houses and beginning to use improvisation more and more—not only to develop material for the new shows, but in the performance as well. I soon realized that in certain circles I should not mention my desire to work in improvisation and comedy revue. I knew I had to go to The Second City if I wanted to learn more.

In the summer of 1973, I joined The Second City as a member of the touring company. Later, I was fortunate enough to open three shows as a member of the resident company on the Chicago Mainstage. Most of our training at The Second City was based on Spolin's theater games, but there was an improvisational underground beginning to stir. Members of the Organic Theater and Steppenwolf Theatre were using improvisation to help create and shape their new productions. Del Close, the resident director at The Second City, began conducting workshops to explore a performance form he had helped develop at the San Francisco Committee in the mid-1960s called Harold. We began to explore the possibilities of alternate formats to traditional comedy revues. It was an exciting time to be in Chicago.

Although we were unaware of it and thought we were the cutting edge, improvisation was beginning to be embraced by theaters around the world. American directors like John Cassavetes and Robert Altman were using improvisation to develop scenes for their films *A Woman Under the Influence* and *Nashville,* respectively. In Canada, the collective theater movement was producing cast-created plays like *The Farm Show* (*The Farm Show* was Theatre Passe Muraille's ensemble-created play about a farm community

and was developed over a summer while the cast worked and lived in that community). Peter Brook was developing ensemble-created plays in England; in Central and South America, theater companies were developing plays using improvisation to evade government censorship. Companies throughout Europe were using improvisation to develop new work. Some time ago, I led a workshop for twenty-one visiting artistic directors from the former Soviet Union. They told me that within two weeks after perestroika, there were more than two hundred theater groups performing improvised theater in Moscow and Leningrad alone.

After I left The Second City, I moved to Los Angeles. I began to teach classes in improvisation at the Hollywood Canteen on Melrose Avenue. Across the street, Gary Austin was starting the Groundlings. There were private weekly workshops for Second City alums at the Improvisation, which was also on Melrose. Meg Staahl was starting the Comedy Store Players at the Comedy Store on Sunset Boulevard. Cast members included Robin Williams and Betty Thomas. There were dozens of groups in L.A. and thousands around the country all doing some sort of variation on the same theme. We were all still teaching and working with the model we had been trained in, performing improvised games and scenes à la Second City. Few groups in the United States were exploring improvisation beyond games, and in Los Angeles improvisation was often about getting a showcase and not about the craft itself.

After I was in L.A. for several years, Bernie Sahlins and Joyce Sloane, producers of The Second City in Chicago, invited me to rejoin a branch of The Second City as a resident director. Here was a chance to really explore improvisation at an advanced level. I started at the theater in Edmonton, Canada, and after braving the northern Alberta winds for a time, the owner of The Second City in Canada, Andrew Alexander, invited me to become the artistic director of The Second City in Toronto.

It was there that I had the opportunity to develop what we began to call long-form improvisation. I kept going back to the

thirty-minute play improvised by that Chicago touring company and to Del's challenge. I began conducting experimental workshops early on Saturday mornings with actors from the Toronto area. They were not official Second City workshops—there was no advertising and no tuition. Actors told other actors about the work we were doing, and soon we had a pretty good crew working on improvising plays. We even had a few actors from the Stratford and Shaw festivals driving in every week to participate.

The purpose of those early morning workshops was to explore Del's challenge: to improvise a one-act play from scratch in the evening, transcribe it overnight, and send it off to Samuel French for publication in the morning. Early on in the workshop process we began to run into stumbling blocks. The techniques we all knew from Spolin's games worked very well for improvising short scenes but were not as useful for improvising longer plays. We soon realized that we would have to develop new tools and ways of approaching improvisation in order to accomplish our goal of developing improvised plays from scratch.

After a year of Saturday workshops, we got to the point where we could create one-act plays from a single suggestion of a "where," and in so doing, we opened a door to a whole new way of improvising.

Chicago had several good places to study improvisation, in particular: the Players Workshop run by Josephine Forsberg, the Piven Theatre Workshops in Evanston run by Joyce and Byrne Piven, the Second City workshops being taught by Don DePollo, and Charna Halpern had just partnered with Del Close to develop an all-improvised evening using the Harold at Improv Olympic, now iO, which had found a temporary home at Crosscurrents, run by Thom Goodman. It was said that every time two actors got together in Chicago for a cup of coffee another improv group was formed, and it wasn't too far from the truth.

I was eager to continue the work we had started in Toronto. Halpern and Close allowed me to teach workshops at the Improv Olympic. We called those early workshops long-form improvisation:

beyond games, and we defined long-form as sustaining a character for an extended period of time. The term *long-form* has come to suggest many different types of improvisation, but even then the phrase changed and came to mean a performance where the lights were not taken down during the show—unlike the more traditional revue styles, which were comprised of short scenes and blackouts.

There was a good core group of improvisers in Chicago who signed up for the first classes. They were, for the most part, actors who had explored all of the possible training in improvisation to be had in Chicago at that time, but who had not yet had an opportunity to try out for The Second City. When we first started the workshops, many in the improvisational community thought long-form and creating one-act plays from scratch was impossible. They had hit the same wall we had years earlier in Toronto with Spolin's games and short-scene structures. With only the games as a base, it was very difficult to sustain a long scene or play because of the games' natural arc.

Soon we started a small theater group called the Windy City Players (see appendix) to perform improvised one-act plays. We started with dozens of ideas and techniques from our collective experiences, along with the new techniques we had been working with in Canada and at the Improv Olympic. This group was able to take the work to the next level. They helped to develop the principles for a workshop technique and a process of improvising beyond games. Working as an ensemble, we were able to create new exercises and games for training and performance, solidify techniques we had been working on, and perform improvised one-act plays at Crosscurrents. Like most things that work well, it was much simpler than we expected.

What we discovered in those early workshops is the basis for most of the ideas in this book. The most important idea is simply focusing out and avoiding conscious choices while improvising. Improvisation is too often evaluated in terms of good choices or bad choices. If our initiations on stage get a good response from the au-

dience—a laugh—then it is a good choice and vice versa. When we are working at our peak, we should not be in control or even aware of our choices. In focusing out, we learned the importance of making discoveries on stage and reacting to those discoveries.

After all was said and done, the process we developed boils down to three major points. The first is to explore and heighten a point of concentration (POC). A POC gives us action instead of just activities. We learn to focus out, make discoveries, and react to those discoveries. The second is to explore and heighten a point of view (POV). A POV gives us a method of creating dialogue, which moves the play forward, avoids dialogue traps, and heightens our knowledge of the character. The third is to explore and heighten scenic focus, which helps us to focus the play one action at a time and allows the actor to live in the moment. The improvised play builds moment to moment like a snowball rolling down a hill. Most of the techniques boil down to focusing out, making discoveries, and having an emotional and physical reaction to those discoveries.

I was eager to see how the principles we had worked on would work with actors who were training in more traditional methods. Jane Brody, who started the Audition Centre, allowed me to teach a series of workshops called Improvisation for Actors. Surprisingly, actors with little or no improvisational training responded better to and picked up on the work quicker than improv-trained actors (see appendix). Perhaps it is because improvisation, at its core, is an actor's medium. With the success of *Saturday Night Live, SCTV,* and other television and film projects, many people came to Chicago to study improvisation. Their goal was to take some classes so they could audition for The Second City or *Saturday Night Live* and become famous as soon as possible. The students at the Audition Centre, on the other hand, were focused on their long-term careers as actors, and they took the work seriously and devoured the new long-form improvisation techniques.

In Chicago and Toronto, we found that most of the techniques we were developing for long-form improvisation could be used to train

actors whether they were working in improvisation or traditional text. We had developed a way to work that really did allow us to create and improvise beyond games and to build a bridge between theater and improvisation. The fact that the two disciplines were considered separate was short-sighted and, in my mind, wrong.

When I first started working on long-form improvisation, I thought I was going head to head against everything I had known from Viola Spolin. But I discovered along the way that almost everything we came up with in our workshops was built on the foundation of the folks who had come before us and who had pioneered modern improvisation in North America. That being said, I believe we have developed a few techniques which have influenced modern improvisation and which will serve as a viable process for training actors in the future.

DEL CLOSE'S GIFT to me years ago—his impossible challenge—was actually quite possible; it just took a little time to figure it out. Not too long ago, on the eve of his death, there was an extraordinary party held in a small dining room at the Illinois Masonic Medical Center in Chicago for those of us who loved Del to say good-bye. Del was not very strong that night, but he took the time to give me another gift that evening. The last thing he said to me was, "You did it. You proved to us that it is possible to improvise plays of literary quality from scratch. Well done."

—Michael J. Gellman

Note on the Text

THIS IS NOT THE BOOK I THOUGHT I was going to write.

Creating this book was an improvisation, and like any improvisation, it led me to places I didn't expect to go. And like any improvisation, what got me over the rough patches were the principles of the basic training I received as a Conservatory student at The Second City Training Center nearly twenty years ago. Follow the follower. Stay in the moment. Focus on your partner and react. Make discoveries.

To prepare for writing the book, I observed a nine-month-long workshop of Michael Gellman's long-form improvisation techniques. I was supposed to take copious notes, conduct extensive interviews with the participants, and review the videotapes that documented the entire project. When it was all over, my job was to cowrite, with Gellman, a straightforward manual that detailed the different exercises and excerpted stories from the participants' interviews.

But by the time the workshops were over, I knew I was in big trouble. I'd stopped taking notes after the third session, and I didn't formally interview any of the participants. And the thought of looking at any of that footage was simply overwhelming. How was I supposed to write a book?

All I had was my experience of it—sitting in the dark at the back of the theater, watching it unfold from moment to moment. Talking to the participants on the way to the parking garage, over coffee, in the lobby of the Training Center. And countless discussions with Gellman as I drove him to rehearsal, met him for breakfast, called

him on my cell phone when I was stuck in traffic. A lot of these discussions were actually arguments, but I'll get to that later.

We kept getting together to work on the book, and we could not get started. We wrote up outlines of the workshop sessions in the exact order in which they happened. We waxed poetic about the magic of theater and the alchemy of improvisation. We wrote up lists of important points to cover and somehow lost every one between each meeting and the next. We threw out the outlines and started new ones. We got distracted and simply got together to eat pancakes and tell each other funny stories, sentimental stories, scary stories, inspirational stories. And then we'd freak out that we were so far behind on the book.

We tried to figure out how to get unstuck. Guiltily, Gellman would say he needed to study his thirty years of notebooks. Guiltily, I would say I should look at the workshop footage.

Weeks spiraled into months, and we got nothing done. Not one page. Writers call this a block, and it is measured in distance from your deadline. Improvisers call it being up in your head, and it is measured in those lethal seconds that feel like hours before the stage manager puts you out of your misery and kills the lights. As any good improviser will tell you, you can save yourself from this slow, painful death by getting your focus off of yourself.

So we did. We did it by creating three characters—Geoff, Marty, and Kristin—and sending them through Gellman's workshop. This approach made a lot of sense to us—after all, it had worked for Constantin Stanislavski in *An Actor Prepares.*

We quickly established a working routine. Gellman would talk me through the steps of a particular exercise, then I'd head off to the computer to write a section putting Geoff, Marty, Kristin, and other fictional workshops participants through it. Drawing on the hours of observation and discussion, I was able to imagine the discoveries and problems each of these characters, with their different personalities and learning styles, might encounter. Then I'd write a very rough draft of what I thought Gellman's comments might be.

Next Gellman and I would review the section, enjoy the parts that we both thought were working, and discuss the parts we weren't sure about. And then I would rewrite.

One of the first discussions was when Gellman balked at appearing in the book as himself. He wondered if we should create a fictionalized teacher.

"It's just so uncomfortable reading this," he said. "He's this guy with my name. It's like having a doppelgänger."

"Or maybe you're the doppelgänger, and this Gellman in the book is the real one," I offered.

We never sorted out which was the doppelgänger, but we did decide to use Gellman's real name in the book.

The problem was that we had taken a long time to figure out how to write the book. We were panicky that we weren't going to make our deadline, so we asked for a meeting with Kelly Leonard, the vice president of The Second City, to get his support for an extension from the publisher.

Leonard has produced more than forty shows for The Second City, so this wasn't the first time he'd seen people in his office making excuses, assuring him they were now on the right track, and begging for more time.

"What's the problem here?" he exclaimed. "You spent too long in process, and now you have to pull out the stops to make the opening? Is that it?"

We nodded. That was it.

"Oh, come on, you guys. This is Second City. This is what we *do*."

He was right, of course. You don't get more time. The show must go on. Without an ironclad deadline, most of us would stay in process forever, and sooner or later you have to deliver a product.

This gap between process and product was uncomfortable during the actual workshop. It was even more uncomfortable when it came time to write about it.

I was convinced that something was missing, and I was determined to get Gellman to admit it. There were many nights when

we argued about it until past midnight. Over and over again, I made him explain scenic focus, point of concentration, point of view. And then I'd tell him something didn't make sense, something was missing. I'd point out all of the times in rehearsal that it hadn't worked. He'd counter with the times that it had.

Finally, I told him that I didn't want people reading the book to think that these techniques were foolproof—or even reliable, for that matter. I'd seen it all go wrong too many times, and every time he explained the process, I felt like something was missing.

Finally, he gave in. "You're probably right," he sighed. "Something is missing."

Satisfied that we weren't going to mislead innocent readers, my mind was clear to finish the book. I reviewed the final set of exercise instructions, and then I began to imagine Geoff, Kristin, and Marty in them. I began to write.

And then I saw it—what I had been missing in the explanations. The improviser. The improviser on the journey. And where before I could only see the potential for failure, now I saw how and why it all fit together. I saw how it worked if all the pieces were in place. A play really will unfold, but only if each and every improviser abides by the principles of his or her basic training.

Follow the follower. Stay in the moment. Focus on your partner and react. Make discoveries.

—Mary Scruggs

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to simply be there, working and growing in the company of such wonderful people.

—Mary Scruggs

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—Michael J. Gellman

Process

CHAPTER 1

An Improviser's Journey

WHEN I SIGNED UP TO AUDITION for a workshop being led by Michael Gellman at The Second City Training Center, I wasn't sure whether I was acting on faith or out of desperation. I'd been through an awful year in Chicago—and not just because of the brutal winter. I had come to this city to be an actor—and by "actor," I mean someone who actually gets paid to act. After a particularly bitter setback, I had more or less given up hope that I would ever achieve that goal.

I stood back and looked at my name on the sheet—Geoff Hart—and realized that I wasn't finished with my journey. Like a shipwrecked Odysseus I had been hiding out, allowing my resentments, my wounded pride, and my fears to strand me.

But I should probably go back to the very beginning of my journey, which began four years before I even got to Chicago or The Second City, when I entered college. I majored in theater at a small college in the Midwest—which meant I had a nice, well-rounded liberal arts degree. As a theater major, I still took lots of required core classes—literature, world history, philosophy, sociology, even a couple of science classes. But my favorite classes were the theater classes—playwriting, directing, history of the theater, scene and costume design, and, of course, acting.

In retrospect, I realize that my theater classes focused more on theory and text analysis than on practical work. As a result,

I knew how to examine theater, and I knew how to discuss theater. I knew to call the art form the "theater" and the physical area you did it in "the space." But I had no idea how to work in either. Even though I was lucky enough to get cast in several plays in college, those bloated renditions of Aeschylus, Marlowe, Ibsen, Sam Shepard, et al. gave me no real idea of the working actor's process.

And I didn't know this when I first arrived in Chicago.

I thought I was playing it smart by coming to Chicago before trying New York. I knew that a lot of actors had started out in Chicago—Dennis Franz, John Mahoney, and Gary Sinise. I also knew there were a lot of ad agencies in Chicago. So I figured I'd do commercials during the day and real theater at night—my top picks of theaters to work at included the Goodman, Steppenwolf, and Chicago Shakespeare. In about a year or two, I should be ready to go to New York with a fat portfolio of glowing press clippings and a reel.

It was a good, sensible plan. I had to keep telling myself that, because I was a bit terrified at first. After all, I had little money, no friends, and no contacts.

The first order of business was survival. With my shiny new bachelor of arts degree I quickly found a soul-deadening day job as an administrative assistant at a law office in the Loop. Then I found a cheap place to live, and I learned how to use the CTA.

I gave myself two weeks to settle in, and then I was ready to start my assault on the Chicago theater scene. I picked up the local free weeklies that listed auditions for the non-Equity theaters. I made half a dozen appointments and spent an entire weekend going to auditions—a little worried about how I'd juggle multiple offers.

It ended up being a great weekend, though. I was well prepared, I was confident, and I felt a genuine sense of accomplishment from finding my way around town on my own. I got four callbacks—all of them at night during the following week.

At one of these callbacks I was teamed up with a girl named Kristin for a cold reading. The director handed us a few pages from

a new play and told us to go in the hall to work on it a bit. While the director talked, someone I assumed was the playwright paced the back of the theater, scowling at us, saying nothing.

Kristin and I went into the hallway, where other pairs of actors huddled over script pages, urgently rehearsing in hushed voices. I glanced over the pages—the director had told us nothing about the play.

"So, I guess we're soldiers in Iraq," I said, flipping through the pages. Kristin didn't answer me, so I looked up at her. She seemed like she might be a couple of years older than I was—but probably not thirty yet. She had short, wavy brown hair, and her hazel eyes were bright and energetic. I wondered if she was new to Chicago, too, but I didn't want to ask, because she was studying her script, her fingers pressed into her lips. When she finished, she drew in a sharp breath and looked up at me.

"The Gulf War, not the current one. And you're a marine, and I'm a medic. But let's stop analyzing it to death and just dive in."

She was pretty bossy, but I decided not to call her on it. I didn't know how much time we had to prep the scene, and it would be pretty stupid to stir up trouble with a scene partner in an audition.

So we read through it, and afterward she said, "I really like how you explored Mike's lower status in the scene—but I'm not sure I responded to that fully."

I wasn't sure what she meant by "lower status"—she used the term as though everyone did when talking about acting. I'd never considered status as a dynamic in the scene—but it made sense.

"I think he's lower status in the beginning, but by the end it starts to shift," I offered, hoping I sounded like I knew what I was talking about.

"Yes!" Kristin grabbed my arm. "That's what we missed. Let's do it again."

Bossy or not, I couldn't help but like her. She took acting seriously, and she was good. I thought she was going off script, because her reading sounded so spontaneous.

We didn't even finish the second read-through before we were ushered back into the theater to perform it. I was nervous at the top of the scene, and then I felt the character take me over. I felt his fear of enemy snipers course through me, and I was surprised by an almost overwhelming urge to protect Kristin's character. By the end of the scene, I thought we were both brilliant. I even thought that the playwright's scowl had loosened a bit around the edges.

As we walked out together, I asked Kristin if she wanted to go grab coffee or a drink somewhere.

"I promised some friends I'd meet up with them," she said. "But maybe some other time."

"Maybe after the first rehearsal," I suggested.

"Oh, Geoff," she frowned. "We're not going to get cast."

I laughed. "I guess that sounded pretty arrogant. But come on, I think we have a shot. We were pretty good."

"I think we were okay," she said. "But it's not about that. These small theaters just cast their friends."

"So if you can't get in a show unless you're in a clique, why did you audition at all?" I asked.

"I took a class with the playwright last year," she confessed. "You just have to keep showing up places, and sooner or later people get to know you. And once they get to know you, it's much easier to get cast."

"What do they need to know other than I can act?" I asked.

Kristin didn't say anything, she just raised her eyebrows. I knew I sounded defensive, but her attitude bugged me. And I sounded even more defensive when I asked the inevitable: "Okay, what? Is there something wrong with my acting?"

"No, it's not that," she said quickly. "You've obviously got some training. But . . . you really want to hear this?"

"Yeah," I said, even though I didn't.

"You need to lighten up. You were a little stiff in there."

"Stiff."

"Have you ever taken any improv?"

Now I was really annoyed. "No," I said. "I'm an actor, not a comedian."

"That statement right there tells me you need to check out Chicago improv. You need to go to iO, the Annoyance, and Second City. Watch their shows. Take classes. I think you'd be good at it."

I told her I'd think about it—but I didn't mean it. I didn't want more classes. I wanted credits on my résumé.

It turned out that Kristin was right. I didn't get cast in that play or in any of the others I'd been called back for. So I just kept auditioning. I kept going to callbacks. And I still didn't get cast.

I also sent my picture and résumé to several agents. A couple of them actually called me in, but they weren't very encouraging. I performed my monologues, and they smiled and said nice things like, "Ooh, I just love *The Cherry Orchard,*" or "Send me a postcard when you're in something," or "You must be six feet tall!" They told me my hair wasn't a clearly defined color—I should go blond or dye it black. They told me I should gain forty pounds and try out for character roles. They told me I should wait until I grew into my looks a little more and could play leading men. They all seemed to think I needed better headshots.

Finally, one agent took the time to really talk to me. She told me that I needed to start auditioning at smaller theater companies. She also told me to get more training. I asked her what kind of training I should get, and she smiled and said, "Improv. Everyone in Chicago takes improv."

Improv again. I was frustrated. I had just completed four years of studying Sophocles, Shakespeare, and Chekhov, and now everyone was telling me that what I really needed was comedy classes.

But I also remembered the other thing Kristin said, that it's important to get to know people. If everyone in Chicago was studying improv, it made sense that taking classes would be a good way to make contacts.

So I Googled improv classes and found this one class at The Second City that looked right for me—Improvisation for Actors, or IFA.

I went in skeptical, but by the end of my first class I had dropped my suspicions because I was having so much fun. After barely introducing himself, the instructor had us all up on our feet playing a game to learn each other's names. Then we passed imaginary objects back and forth to each other, letting them transform into different objects. My partner and I started with a baseball that turned into a cupcake, then a kitten, then a cactus.

What I liked the most about the class was that we didn't spend a lot of time talking about the exercises. We just did them. The instructor called things out while we were doing the exercises, like "Is that a live kitten or a stuffed kitten? Make it specific." We made adjustments to what we were doing while we were still engaged in the exercise. In a three-hour class, I was performing more than half of the time.

I ended up taking a few of these Improvisation for Actors classes because I liked the work so much. The games I learned laid a foundation of playfulness, creativity, spontaneity, and connection to others. We played games to explore the emotions and personalities of characters, as well as games that simply explored the physical attributes of characters. Working as an ensemble, we created elaborate environments—forest clearings, the cargo hold of a ship, an international scientific laboratory in Antarctica—and we created characters to play in those environments.

And we created scenes—that was the part I enjoyed the most. We walked through imaginary doors and into worlds where every moment had the potential of surprise, and my classmates were fellow adventurers exploring the unknown.

After I learned the basics of improvisation, I felt released from the burdens of analyzing and memorizing text. Through improvising, theater became much more alive for me. I felt bound to the other players on the stage in a way I hadn't experienced before. I started to realize how much I had been buried in a sort of artistic self-absorption that revolved around text analysis, creating my character through a solitary process, and then trying to bring that

character's thoughts and emotions into rehearsal and performance. The more I improvised, the more I felt that my previous approach to acting had involved more manufacturing and less creating than I wanted to admit. No wonder I'd been getting such tepid responses to my work. I hadn't been alive within it.

I also made a lot of great friends, including this guy Marty, whose roommate had just moved back to Wisconsin and stuck Marty with a lease on a two-bedroom apartment three blocks from Wrigley Field. Marty asked me if I wanted to move in, and since I was on a month-to-month lease at my current place, there was no reason why I couldn't. The offer came at a great time, because having a roommate cut my expenses, and I wanted to audition for Second City's Conservatory Program, which meant another year of paying for classes.

I was excited about the Conservatory. I had really enjoyed the improv for actors classes, and I felt they made me a better actor. But I was starting to get interested in improvisation as something more than a way to improve my acting. I liked working collaboratively with an ensemble. I like creating scenes. I liked the spontaneity and energy of good improv.

And I liked the challenge of it—that's why the Conservatory excited me. I saw it as a step up. You had to audition to get in. The Conservatory was for people who were serious about what they were doing, like me. Plus, I was hearing from everyone that it was a very important credit to have on your Chicago résumé.

I knew going into the audition that about sixty percent wouldn't make the cut, but I wasn't worried. A lot of those people didn't have much training outside of Second City classes.

The audition was short and simple. First we all had to improvise a three-person scene. Mine wasn't the most inspired or original scene—we were three siblings in a kitchen making dinner—but I felt good about my contribution. My partner had established that her character was really nervous about her Jell-O mold turning out okay, and I built on that by bragging that I had

an excellent technique for unmolding Jell-O. I ended up destroying my imaginary Jell-O, which really started to move the scene forward when the third person in the scene tried to salvage it, but then we were stopped anyway.

For the second part of the audition, we played this fast-paced performance game called Freeze Tag, which is a staple of improvised shows. In Freeze Tag, a line of performers stands at the back of the stage. Two people step forward and start a scene. At any time, someone on the back line can yell, “Freeze!” That performer then steps forward, tags out one of the frozen performers, takes the exact position of that performer, and starts a new scene.

The whole trick to Freeze Tag is to take the position of one of the performers exactly. The big mistake everyone makes in Freeze Tag is to stand on the back line and try to think up clever gimmicks, then jump in and impose them on the scene regardless of what’s actually going on. For example, if I tagged in for an actor who was patting another actor on the back for a job well done, it wouldn’t make sense for me to start the new scene by immediately dropping to the ground and starting to crawl while doing a bit about seeing the world from an ant’s perspective. The fun of watching Freeze Tag is watching the transformation. A bunch of random scenes isn’t fun.

The other mistake people make is to rely on all of the Freeze Tag clichés to explain the physical posture in the scene: “Let me show you this new dance move,” or “I told you not to put superglue all over yourself and then run into me,” or “I didn’t know you were gay.”

At the audition I only tagged in once, because I didn’t want to hog the stage. And I felt so confident about my scene work that I was able to play Freeze Tag exactly how my instructors always told me to do it—just tag in, take the position, and let the idea come to you in the moment.

I called, “Freeze,” just as a guy and girl were moving toward each other to embrace. I tagged out the guy and took his position, arms outstretched toward the girl. I said the first thing that came into my mind, which was simply: “Ta da!” And the girl smiled and

started walking toward me with wobbly toddler steps. "Good girl," I said. "Come to Daddy! Daddy's gotcha! Daddy's . . ." and the girl tripped and fell on her face. I was tagged out right after that, and I didn't tag in again before my group was released.

I got in.

After I got into the Conservatory, I had a new goal: to get hired by Second City. I had it all mapped out—all I had to do was get through the classes, audition for the national touring companies, pay my dues by touring around the country for a while, then move on to the Chicago Mainstage. From there, the door was wide open to a career in television or film.

A lot of people whose careers I admired had traveled this exact same path, people who had left Second City and gone on to make real, lasting contributions not only as comedic actors but as writers, producers, directors, and dramatic actors. People like Alan Arkin, Mike Nicholls, Bill Murray, Harold Ramis, Bonnie Hunt, and Steve Carell. The list went on and on.

I wasn't kidding myself—I knew it would be hard work. But I also thought I had a good shot at it because once I was in the Conservatory, things really started happening for me. Everywhere I turned, I was getting affirmation that I was on the right path.

In addition to the Conservatory, I took classes at iO and the Annoyance Theatre, and they went great. Over at iO, I was invited to join a couple of the in-house improv teams, so I was performing there a couple of nights a week.

Then a girl in my Annoyance class told me she was going to be stage-managing the production of a new play at a storefront theater on Clark Street. She told me I should come out and audition, and I did. I got the lead.

I even got an agent to sign me. She started sending me out on commercial and industrial auditions, and I landed a role in an employee-training film playing the assistant manager of a burger joint gone awry. I made enough money on that one gig to pay my rent for three months.

I was so busy that it seemed like the whole year flew by, and soon I was in level 5, the end of my Conservatory training, which culminated in an eight-week run of a Second City–style revue on Monday nights. By the third week of our run, my ensemble was pretty excited about the audience response we were getting. There were two other sections of level 5 also running on Monday nights, and we were pretty sure ours was the best and the funniest.

After eight weeks we had a graduation ceremony of sorts. On closing night of the level-5 shows, the Conservatory faculty always hosted a little celebration—free pizza, beer, and a special T-shirt rolled up like a diploma and handed to each student on stage.

It was over in an hour, but we still wanted to celebrate. Clutching our T-shirts, and with a couple of beers and a few slices of pizza under our belts, we moved the celebration from the theater to the bar across the street. Crowded into a booth and with a fresh round of drinks, we wanted to talk about our next steps. Some of my classmates talked about moving to Los Angeles to break into film and television, but no one seemed to have any definite plans in place. Others were going to continue performing with various improv teams around town. A bunch of people wanted to remount our level-5 show, either in the Skybox at the Training Center or somewhere else in town.

And nearly everyone was planning to audition for The Second City National Touring Company, or as everyone simply called it, TourCo. The next round of auditions was in two weeks. The timing couldn't have been better.

Marty was sure that I was going to get in. Over at iO I had survived several rounds of cuts, and I was still performing with one of the teams there. I told Marty he should audition, too. He shook his head.

"I don't want to waste their time," he said, with a rueful smile.

I didn't know what to say. I felt that the loyal thing would be to encourage him to go for it, but I also doubted he'd get in. I loved working with Marty onstage, and so did everyone else. First of all, he was just such a likable guy—gangly, with a good-

natured grin and a big, shaggy head of hair. Onstage, his improvisation was quirky, but it was honest. He had the ability to keep real emotions present in the scene—instructors adored him for this. So did we. Every time you took the stage with Marty you went to a magical place.

But, truth be told, he just wasn't funny. We went through iO at the same time, and he never made any of the teams. Not one. We all loved Marty, but we were talking about Second City. Second City was show business. Taking a class and getting hired are two very different things, and we all knew it. We knew that Second City was looking for people who could make audiences laugh.

"You could just try," I said to him. Marty laughed and leaned back in his chair.

"I believe the world is a big place," he said. "Big enough to hold wonders in addition to and equal to TourCo."

"Wonders?"

"I see improv as a tool of transformation," Marty said. "That's why it works so well for comedy. But it also works for therapy, for spiritual discovery, for . . ."

"So you're saying," I interrupted, "that you're going to go do improv on some mountaintop in Tibet?"

"Great idea," Marty said, grinning.

Tibet wasn't for me, so I called Second City the next morning to sign up for TourCo auditions. I got a great slot—eleven in the morning. They were starting at ten and breaking for lunch at one, so I figured that at eleven the producers should be warmed up but not tired out, and still in a good mood.

On the morning of the audition I got to the theater half an hour early. I handed in my headshots, filled out my paperwork, and waited with the rest of my quickly forming audition group.

There were ten of us in all, and when we got into the theater, the director, Mick, introduced himself and told us to form a back line on the stage. As we were lining up, I saw my Conservatory level-4 teacher, Anne, sitting with the other TourCo directors.

They were all huddled over a small stack of headshots, but she looked up and smiled at me in acknowledgment. That made me feel a lot less nervous.

To start out, we each had to introduce ourselves and tell everyone one thing about ourselves that had nothing to do with theater or improv. One of the guys in the line before me tried to do a series of jokes before Mick stopped him by gently repeating the original direction to tell one thing. Then the girl next to him said her name, started giggling, and said she was really nervous. I was growing more confident by the moment.

When it was my turn, I stepped forward and simply said, “I’m Geoff Hart, and I’m licensed to ride any class of motorcycle.” I heard someone mutter, “Cool,” and a couple of the auditioners nodded their heads. I was relieved, and I thought I made the right decision by not going for some cheesy joke.

Then Mick explained that we were going to perform short, two-person scenes that he would edit by calling for a new scene with new actors. It was during these short scenes that the joking guy revealed himself as the scene partner from hell. He seemed determined to break every improv rule in the book—if he even knew any of the rules. By the time we were a few minutes into the audition, I was sure he’d never even taken an improv class.

During his first scene, he grabbed his partner and started humping on her. In another scene, his partner was warming his hands at a campfire, and he put it out with mimed urination.

I successfully ignored him during the bulk of the audition, but I found him very distracting. Most of the scenes were getting edited after about thirty seconds, so I knew when I went up I not only had to stay focused, but I had to hit the ground running.

In one scene, my partner and I were taking a test, and I was trying to cheat off of him.

“What’d ya put for number two?” I asked. First he gave me a short answer, but then he started elaborating. It became clear that

it was an essay test. I feverishly copied down what he was feeding me, until I questioned his transition out of his introductory paragraph. We got a big laugh, and the scene was called.

In another scene, I was a barista making a latte for a girl who was being very demanding. But I got a lot of laughs when I didn't go for the obvious response of getting annoyed. Instead I was enjoying it and egging her on to get even tougher with me. It really started to escalate just as we got edited.

Then the scene partner from hell barged in on someone else's scene—a husband and wife who had pulled over in their car to look at a map. He raged into the scene growling, "I'm a hungry, hungry bear!" Then he mauled the husband and announced, "He's dead!" As he tried to kiss the wife, the scene was edited.

"Let's stay with two-person scenes," Mick reminded us. "I'll call you out in pairs, and we're going to let these go on a little longer."

After three pretty lackluster scenes, the very thing I was dreading happened—I was called to go up with the scene partner from hell. I decided that the best strategy would be to take charge, so I quickly established that we were roommates in the basement of our apartment building looking for the fuse box.

I said, "Hand me that flashlight."

"What do you need a flashlight in the daytime for?" he replied.

"I think this one goes to our apartment," I continued.

"We don't have an apartment," he offered.

I said, "I smell something like . . . like toast or something burning."

To that he said, "You're always thinking about eating. That's why you weigh four hundred pounds." And then he launched into what I can only describe as a standup routine on the hilarious details of the bodily functions of the morbidly obese.

Up until that point, I had been furious with the scene partner from hell. Now, I was furious with the various producers and faculty at the audition. They had someone calling the end of the scenes, so why wasn't anyone stopping this guy and calling him out

on his crap? How was I supposed to show them what I could do with someone thwarting me at every turn?

When I got back out into the lobby, I ran into someone from my class who asked me how it went. I told him it sucked, and I added that I thought it was really unfair that they hadn't screened the people coming in. My classmate hopefully suggested that maybe I would get called back.

I thought about Anne, my level-4 teacher, and I felt better. Yeah, that made sense. She knew what I could do, she'd put in a good word for me. And at a callback all of the nut jobs would be screened out.

But I didn't get called back.

I was devastated. For several days, I walked around in a daze. I couldn't believe it. Not even a callback.

I ran into Anne near a coffee shop on Wells Street, and I asked her what she thought I could have done better.

"Oh, you did fine," she said vaguely.

"I had a real idiot up there with me," I prompted her.

"Oh, yeah," she laughed. "The king of comedy."

It bugged me that she laughed. I didn't think it was funny at all. "Why didn't someone stop him?" I asked.

"We generally don't do that."

"Why not? He broke every rule in the book," I argued.

"Sure, but we don't stop a scene unless it's a physical safety issue. We want to see how people handle stressful situations. Let's face it: touring is stressful."

Now I really wanted to argue.

"But when would I ever encounter a situation like that in TourCo? It's not like you would cast a nut like that, right?"

"Of course not," she said gently. "But how you handle a scene that's tanking really does tell us a lot about you."

"Like what? What was I supposed to do?" I demanded.

"I'll tell you what you shouldn't have done. You shouldn't have

stood there as Geoff the Improviser judging your scene partner. You should have reacted as the character onstage to what his character was doing."

"But he wasn't playing a character!" I exclaimed.

"According to you," she said. "Because you chose to judge his performance instead of responding to what he was creating."

"I feel like I've wasted a year and a half learning something I obviously don't know anything about," I said.

"I know you're disappointed." She looked at me a moment. "If you want to do this, just keep at it. Keep working out, get some more stage time under your belt, and TourCo auditions will roll around again in another year, year and a half."

I knew one thing—I wasn't waiting a year and a half for TourCo auditions. I'd already wasted more than enough time with improv.

I continued to perform with my long-form improv team at iO every other Friday night, but I was starting to feel restless. I had been so proud of this new long form we had created called *Grandma's Car,* but now I was tired of doing it. Besides, I felt like we were just a big crowd of a couple hundred improvisers performing for each other every week.

A month later I was cast in a production of *The Three Sisters.* That got great reviews, so it ran for nearly three months. And after that I just stopped auditioning.

Without doing shows and taking classes at night, I got to bed earlier, and I actually started getting to work on time. At the law office where I worked, one of the partners asked me if I'd be interested in more responsibility and a raise. I told him I was. I even started thinking about taking the LSATs in the spring, and my parents eagerly offered to pay for the prep classes and the test fee.

About six months after the spring TourCo auditions, I went back to The Second City Training Center. I was there because Marty was in some show in Donny's Skybox. It was the perfect show for Marty because it wasn't all that funny, although it was very interesting.

It was called *Liquid Lunch,* and it had been directed by Michael Gellman, one of the teachers at the Training Center. The basic premise of it was pretty simple—five guys and a bartender in a tavern at lunchtime on a weekday. It started out with the bartender onstage and then one by one the characters came in. After a while, they all started talking together.

My favorite part was the beginning, before they started talking. I felt like I was really watching guys in a bar. I liked this one guy in particular—he was watching the TV over the bar, and I could tell how he felt about what was on the TV simply by watching his eyes. Usually when people try to create something like that they totally overdo it. They jump up and cheer, or they wipe their eyes and sniff—really, really corny stuff. This was different.

Once they started talking, though, it wasn't as good. Some of it felt expositional and forced. For example, this one guy came in and, as he was taking his seat, he said to the bartender, "How are you today, Tom? I tell ya, after hoisting beams all morning, I decided to have my usual for lunch. A Guinness." No one talks like this. Marty seemed to handle this kind of awkwardness by hardly talking at all, which also felt weird to me. At certain points, it seemed like he might as well be out in the house with the rest of the audience. But overall, I liked it a lot. In some ways it had the best of both worlds—a lot of the spontaneous, natural feel of improv, and a little more complexity in terms of emotion, character, and story, like you'd see in a play.

After the show, I was hanging around in the lobby waiting for Marty. It felt weird to be back there. I had mostly good associations with the Training Center, but the wave of nostalgia I felt just made me feel worse about the whole TourCo thing. I suddenly felt a lot older than twenty-six. A has-been. Washed up.

To torture myself further, I started reading the callboard. It was cluttered with colorful, noisy posters and notices: notices for the level-5 writing program show auditions, posters for sketch shows

with glowing quotes from critics, posters for Conservatory grad shows. All of it seemed so needy and noisy—the punny titles, the overwrought clip art, the grinning cast photos.

And then I saw something else—a plain sheet of paper with simple type and no pictures:

> *Process.* Michael Gellman, a Second City alumnus, actor, director, and a current senior teacher for The Second City Training Center Conservatory, is auditioning advanced actors for a series of free workshops that will explore long-form improvisational techniques and ways those techniques can be used to create fully improvised plays.

I read further to find out that to audition, actors had to have either a degree in theater or equivalent professional experience. That was good because it would mean that the participants would have basic skills.

I had already made up my mind that I wanted to audition when Marty walked up and said, "Yeah, I was going to tell you about that. I think we should go for it."

"You want to do this, too?" I asked.

"I didn't see the word comedy, so I think I can," Marty said.

"Come on, you're one of the funniest guys I know," I chided.

"Just not onstage. But really, this looks like it might be kinda cool. I really liked doing this *Liquid Lunch* thing, and this would be much more focused on the workshop process and less on getting ready for performance."

I looked back at the board and noted that the workshop ended with just one showcase performance.

"We never had Gellman as a teacher," I said doubtfully. And it was true. We'd gone all through the Conservatory and never had Gellman as a teacher.

"All the more reason to do it," Marty said.

“He has kind of a reputation,” I said.

“All the more reason to do it,” Marty said and grinned. “Listen, Gellman’s like a crazy old sailor—an old man of the sea.”

“Who does that make you?” I asked. “Ishmael?”

“Seriously. Gellman—he sits on the pier ranting about the kraken and telling stories about sirens. He hears voices in the pounding surf. He’s all scarred up and missing a couple of limbs. But he knows the secrets of the deep. He knows the secrets of the deep.”

CHAPTER 2

The Audition

MARTY HAD IT RIGHT. GELLMAN did know the secrets of the deep—because he had been there. All over The Second City there were photographs of the actors who had performed there, and Gellman was among them. I knew that he got his start as an understudy for Bill Murray and that his first regular gig at The Second City was with the Canadian company, which had come to Chicago to work on its new show. That company included Dan Aykroyd, Gilda Radner, Catherine O'Hara, John Candy, and Eugene Levy. In the 1970s Gellman's mentor had been Del Close, who went on to found iO with Charna Halpern. Gellman had been a part of the development of long-form improvisation, and he had directed for several of Second City's touring and resident companies.

As for the scars and missing limbs, I didn't know about that. I did know he was an intimidating presence around the Training Center—more than six feet tall, he moved through the place with long-limbed strides and a booming voice.

From the moment I walked into the Process workshop audition, it felt very different from the auditions I'd gone to for the Conservatory and TourCo. First of all, we were in much smaller groups, six people per group. Each group was scheduled for a full half hour. This made me a little nervous. What were we going to do for a whole half hour? Marty and I had been

assigned to different groups; he went right before I did. When he came out, I didn't have a chance to ask him how it went before my group was called.

Gellman told everyone to get onstage—which in this case was the front of the room—and said we were going to play Give and Take. I panicked a little. I assumed we were going to do scene work, and I couldn't remember how Give and Take was played.

"Two things," Gellman said. "No more than one person moving. One person must always be moving."

And then I remembered. Give and Take was one of those beginner exercises that teaches you how to share focus onstage. I was surprised that we would do an exercise like this in an audition for advanced improvisers. While we played, Gellman paced and watched us. After a few minutes, he asked us to stop, and then he made some notes.

"Okay then," he said. "Form two straight lines facing one another like you're lining up for dodgeball in gym class."

A girl with curly black hair laughed loudly at this, and Gellman turned and said, "On second thought, Emma, that might not be a bad idea. After a round of dodgeball I'd know a lot about you all."

At this, nervous laughter broke out. Gellman smiled. "I'm not going to make you play dodgeball. Not literally. Well, not even figuratively. Okay, this line," he pointed to the line at stage right, "is the audience. This line," he pointed to the line I was in, "has the performers. Performers, you are in your kitchen. Not the whole group together—each one of you is in your own individual kitchen. You have sixty seconds starting now. Just be in your kitchen."

In a flash, I understood what Gellman was doing. He needed to find out if we had the basic skills to do advanced work, and that meant the ability to share focus onstage. Give and Take would show him that. Now he wanted to see our object work, which meant we had to create imaginary props and an environment using mime techniques.

I knew what to do. I began to bake a cake. I created a refrigerator stage right and grabbed everything I needed from it. Then I mixed all the ingredients in a large mixing bowl, poured the batter into a cake pan, and popped the pan into the oven just as Gellman called sixty seconds.

I felt good about my work. I had created specific objects in the environment, a specific activity, and most importantly, I wasn't boring.

Then my group sat down to become the audience for the other group. I hadn't been able to watch the performers in my group, but I was relieved to see that most of the people in the other group were not very good. They walked through the objects they created, and you could barely tell what the objects they held in their hands were.

There was one exception. There was a guy I recognized from the Training Center. He was tall and the kind of guy girls seem to think is good-looking. His name was Aaron. He just focused on wiping glasses while he stared out a window over his sink. That's all he did, and he was somehow the most interesting one to watch.

Next, Gellman told us to sit in two rows facing each other. He told us to take an object out from under our chairs and make a discovery about it. Then we were supposed to explore and heighten that discovery until we had a physical reaction to it.

I wasn't sure what we were supposed to be doing with this, but I reached under my chair and decided to bring up a coffee cup. In my peripheral vision, I could see other performers using their objects—someone was hammering a nail, someone else was lighting a cigarette. So I drank out of the cup. Gellman stopped us.

"Everyone try it again. This time, just reach under your chairs. Something's been left there for you. Pull it out, and then discover what it is."

I knew exactly what I did wrong the first time. It was like Freeze Tag: you don't sit there thinking up gimmicks, you just show up and let the ideas come to you. I was trying to look good for the audition. I took a deep breath and tried to just do exactly what I was told to do.

I reached under the chair and grabbed something. As I pulled it out, my fingers closed around it—it was small and had a unique texture. I brought it up and looked at it. It was a champagne cork. I threw the champagne cork up in the air and caught it.

Gellman said, "Don't do something to the object, make a discovery about it."

I stopped throwing it and looked at it. I was surprised that there was a fishhook in the cork and fishing line wrapped around it. I was excited—I was really seeing something rather than deciding what I would see. But then I panicked because I couldn't remember what to do next. So I kept looking at the fishhook, and it started to make me nervous, like it could get stuck in my hand. So I moved the cork to my fingertips and held it carefully.

Gellman stopped us. I looked up, and he was looking at me. "Good," he said. "I saw your reaction to your object." And then I remembered that he had told us to explore and heighten our discovery until we had a reaction. I was relieved that I'd managed to pull it off.

After that came the most exciting part of the whole audition. Gellman told all six of us to go to the front of the room to improvise a short one-act play.

"I'll give you a location and relationships," he announced. "The rest of the audition—which is about fifteen minutes—you're going to improvise. Same scene, same characters, same location. You are a group of friends. You're on the front porch of a cabin by a lake in the woods in Wisconsin. Go."

I got that feeling of panic again, and I knew from experience that the best way to handle that feeling is to just start doing something. I started running through the possibilities in my head "Lake house, friends, what time is it? Should I start cooking dinner—wait—we're on the porch—maybe grill something."

I looked over at Aaron and realized with dismay that he was a step ahead of me. He was hauling out a grill and pulling out the grate, inspecting it, rubbing his fingers on it, and reacting to the filth.

"Seems like someone could have cleaned this the last time they used it," he said, surveying the group.

We were fewer than thirty seconds into the scene and he was taking it over. So I snapped, "Clean it yourself." I wasn't even sure if I was reacting as the character or as myself.

"I'm sure you always have time to clean the grill after a cook-out," he sneered at me.

"What is that even supposed to mean?" I countered. Emma, the curly haired girl nervously approached.

"I'll clean that," she said, reaching over to grab the grill from Aaron. At that point some other girl reached in and grabbed the grill away from the curly haired girl.

"Don't clean up after him—you're always cleaning up after him," the second girl said.

For a group of friends, we sure had a lot of conflicts. It turned out that Aaron and I had both had a relationship with the curly haired girl, and she still had feelings for me, even though she was with Aaron. Her best friend was really jealous of her ballet-dancing career. Two other improvisers didn't know the rest of us that well, but they thought we were jerks, so they just sat to the side and made comments about us. At a couple of points, I was concerned that we were arguing too much in the scene, which isn't a good idea when you're improvising.

It seemed to me that the central idea in the scene was the problem between Aaron and me, but we kept getting distracted from that. At least, that seemed most important to me. I had no idea what Gellman was thinking. But the really interesting thing was that as the scene went on, I stopped worrying what Gellman thought. I was more worried about putting Aaron in his place.

And then the audition was over. We had not only filled fifteen minutes, but we'd gone a little bit over. Walking to the El, I had plenty of time to start worrying about what Gellman thought. Did I argue too much? Did I talk too much about things in the past? Was the scene active enough?

But at least I was asking myself better questions than I had after my TourCo audition. And I realized, with a strange mixture of relief and regret, that I hadn't given up. I still wanted to be an actor.

Two days later, Marty and I went together to check the call board at the Training Center. Both of our names were on the list for the workshop. We were in.

CHAPTER 3

A New Journey

REHEARSALS WERE SET FOR NINE in the morning to noon on Sundays, which seemed like a fine idea when I auditioned, but the reality was harsh. We started in February, and it was cold.

Marty wakes up easier than I do, and I was kind of glad that he was around to keep me moving, because otherwise I might have been late. I wanted to stop to get some coffee on the way, but Marty said we should wait until we got to Second City because he wasn't sure how often the trains ran on Sundays. Turns out, not very often. We waited on the platform for almost half an hour, so by the time we got to the corner of North and Wells we didn't have time for the coffee.

Piper's Alley Theater was dark and quiet, almost spooky. The escalators weren't on, so we trudged up their steep metal steps all the way to the fourth floor. It felt strange to see the Training Center lobby so empty. Normally the place was buzzing with dozens of students. Something about the stillness of this familiar place, usually so full of noise and energy, made me feel solemn, like what we were about to do was very important somehow. Marty and I walked down the long main hallway of the Training Center to Room 405, which was all the way in the back. Our first couple of improvised plays would probably be pretty choppy, I thought, but as we went on, maybe we'd come up with something truly worthwhile.

Twelve chairs were set up in two neat rows of six at one end of the large rehearsal room. A thin girl sat in one of the chairs, huddled in her coat, sipping a steaming coffee, staring straight ahead with a sour expression. I was debating whether or not I should try to talk to her when I heard someone call out from the doorway, "Hi, Geoff!"

"Kristin!" I recognized her immediately.

"I'm flattered you remember me," she said. "What was that, two years ago?"

"Something like that," I said. "You see I took your advice."

"What advice was that?" Kristin asked. She was smiling, but her brow was furrowed—the effect was an expression of condescension.

"Improv!" I said. "You told me to take improv."

"Did I really?" Kristin flashed a smile at Marty. "I can be kind of bossy."

Marty blushed and shrugged, which is all he ever does around girls.

"I probably also tried to direct you in our scene," Kristin added.

I told her she had, and she made a face. I introduced her to Marty, who asked her if she'd also gone through the Conservatory. Kristin said, "Oh, sure, like a million years ago."

By now people were taking seats. Looking around the room, I noticed that Aaron—the guy who had cleaned his kitchen in the audition—had made it into the workshop. I also saw Emma, the curly haired girl who had laughed at Gellman's reference to dodgeball at the audition.

A few minutes after nine Gellman entered and said, "Everybody up."

We got out of our chairs, and Gellman told us to get in a circle. I wondered if we were going to play a name game—I was eager to get to improvising plays. But I could also see the value of learning everyone's name. After all, I was going to be working with these people for the next six months.

But we didn't play a name game. We played Pass the Pulse, which is one of those entry-level Viola Spolin games. Spolin, as we'd been told in our IFA classes, was the mother of improvisation. This was virtually a literal statement—Paul Sills, the first director of The Second City back in the 1950s, was Spolin's son. Spolin worked with children in settlement houses throughout Chicago and developed a comprehensive set of improvisation exercises—she called them games—to help those children develop performance skills. Although her games are important, I was surprised that we were bothering with them at all, because I thought we were going to be doing advanced work. But I figured that maybe this was just Gellman's way of warming everybody up.

We stood holding hands, waiting to start.

"You are going to pass a pulse around the circle by squeezing your hands. Start with Aaron, and he will squeeze the hand of the person to his right and so on around the circle. Go."

The pulse went around until Emma squeezed my left hand. I, in turn, squeezed the hand of the person to my right. I could see everyone's arms tensing and releasing as the pulse passed from person to person and went around the room.

"Okay. Now try going a little faster," Gellman said. We kept passing the pulse around the circle, and it kept going faster and faster until all of a sudden it disappeared.

"How does the pulse get lost and stop going around the circle?" Gellman asked.

"Someone didn't pass it," Marty offered.

"That's right," Gellman said. "The pulse stops when someone absorbs the pulse, or the energy of the scene. It doesn't really get lost—it gets absorbed by one of the actors."

Gellman pointed to Marty. "Go."

Again the pulse went around the circle several times. Gellman stopped us and said, "Better. Did you discover anything?"

Kristin, of course, chimed right in. "Yes, it was much easier the

second time because we knew the rhythm of the group, and it's much easier to anticipate the pulse."

"No," said Gellman.

It felt like the air went out of the room. Kristin blushed.

"Are you saying I *didn't* think it was easier?" she asked defensively.

"No. When you talk about whether it's easier or harder, you're simply having an intellectual opinion about the exercise. Easier. Harder. Successful. Not successful. I want to know what you discovered in doing the exercise," Gellman said.

Marty tentatively raised a hand, and Gellman nodded at him. "My hand got squeezed really hard, and I squeezed back to deflect the input. But that was probably wrong, right?"

"Anyone else?"

Someone said, "I felt like if I just stayed loose and didn't anticipate when the pulse was coming, it went better."

And then someone else said, "Would that be easier if we closed our eyes?"

"Try it," Gellman said. So everyone closed their eyes and passed the pulse around the circle again. I stood listening in the silence, and then I felt the pulse strike my hand. I imagined it passing through me for a split second, then I squeezed the hand of the person on my other side and it was gone.

I got it: let it pass through you. Don't anticipate it. Don't absorb it. Don't let the energy onstage die.

We opened our eyes.

"Go again, and keep your eyes open," Gellman said. We did. I could see the pulse moving through us around the circle, but I didn't watch it—I felt it, but I didn't wait for it. It went around once, twice, three times, and Gellman quietly said, "Okay, stop."

The next exercise was Spolin's Three Changes. We divided ourselves into two lines and stood facing each other. Gellman then instructed us to each observe whoever was standing opposite of us—in my case that was Kristin. Then we turned our backs to each other and changed three things about our appearance.

Kristin was being very intense about this exercise. Next to me, Marty was paired with a girl with long, red hair, Sarah. As soon as they turned to face each other again, they started laughing and having a grand old time.

All business, Kristin simply pointed to me and said, “Hair, belt, you’re not supposed to make a face.”

Gellman walked past and heard this. He stopped and said to me, “That’s right, making faces is outside of the parameters of the game. But it’s fine because it’s not really about the rules anyway. What did Kristin change?”

“The part of her hair, she took out her earrings, and she rolled up her shirtsleeve,” I said.

“Great. Now everyone find a new partner, turn around, and change four things.”

Now I was across from Sarah. I turned around. This exercise was so much easier for the girls—they had more stuff to change around. I rolled up a shirtsleeve, tucked part of my shirt into my jeans, took off a shoe entirely, and tucked part of my pant leg into my sock. We turned around. Sarah laughed when she saw me, and we identified what the other had changed. Then Sarah added that I looked like I had just rolled out of bed.

We all switched partners again before I could make some kind of witty comeback. I was across from a clean-cut, older guy named Chad. We turned around, and when I turned back, it was pretty easy to identify five changes on Chad: he had unbuttoned his shirt, unbuckled his pants, messed up his hair, untied his shoes, and pulled his pockets inside out.

Down the line, Kristin and her new partner, a quiet, skinny guy named Dave, were talking to Gellman.

“Have you changed five things?” Gellman was asking.

“Dave can’t get the fifth thing,” Kristin said.

“Then tell him,” Gellman said.

“I turned my necklace so that the clasp is in a different place.”

“How different?” Gellman wanted to know.

Chad and I both glanced over to watch Kristin move the clasp to its original position, then to its new position—about half an inch.

Gellman nodded thoughtfully. "Okay. I see what's going on. The goal of this exercise is not to trick your partner," he said.

"I wasn't trying to trick him," Kristin countered hotly. "The whole point of this exercise is to sharpen your observation skills, and it isn't much of a challenge if the changes are so obvious that you see them right away."

"Ah, but the point of the exercise isn't challenge," Gellman said.

There was a long pause. In the silence, you could almost hear everyone thinking, "Then what is the point?" But no one asked.

Gellman explained, "This is a simple exercise. It's about looking out. You feel a pulse—that's input. You feel energy pass through you. That's Pass the Pulse. Now we're adding another element. You look out. You let someone else look at you. You witness another person. You let yourself be exposed."

I thought I understood these concepts pretty well, so I was relieved when Gellman said, "Let's move on."

But moving on meant playing Mirror, which didn't feel like moving on to me. We all found new partners—I was now partnered with Emma. We stood facing each other, and Gellman asked us to decide who was A and who was B—I was A—and then he told us that the A's would be the mirrors first.

I was so bored with it I thought I was going to go out of my mind. Mirror is exactly what it sounds like: one person moves, and the other person mirrors those moves.

Gellman side-coached us a little bit as we started. "If you're leading, work with your partner. And if you're following, be the best mirror that you can be." Then he started going around from group to group. I heard him say, "Slow down," and then, "Are you leading?" When Gellman got a "Yes," he added, "I shouldn't be able to tell."

Emma was a really easy person to play Mirror with—too easy, actually. She was so slow and predictable that as soon as she started raising her arm, I knew exactly where it would be in sixty

seconds. So I started thinking that it must be close to break, and I could go get some of that coffee I wanted more than an hour ago. And then I started thinking that I wanted to get something to go with the coffee, like a bagel or a scone or a muffin or something.

I was thinking about all of this when I realized that Emma was standing on one foot, twirling the other foot around. I was standing firmly on both of mine, and Gellman was standing right next to us.

"Focus on your partner," he said.

"Sorry," I muttered, and started twirling my foot. Then Gellman told us to switch. I found it even harder to focus on what I was doing when Emma was the mirror. Gellman let us go on for a while. Then we switched. And then we switched again, taking turns initiating action.

Then Gellman said, "Now let it go and trade off freely between A and B, who is leading and who is following."

Of course now I had to pay at least a little attention, and after a minute or so, I really did lose track of who was leading and who was following. After a couple of minutes, Gellman told us to stop and grab a seat.

"So, what did you discover?" he asked. On the other side of the room, I saw Marty raise his hand.

"It was so cool—I felt this incredible release when the roles of follower and leader blurred and then disappeared completely. It was really exciting."

"Great, that's the idea. Anyone else?"

Who was going to top that, or even try? I'll admit that I had gotten into a pretty bad mood by that point, which is why I thought to myself, "Suck-up." But I also knew that was a little unfair. Marty loves all of this touchy-feely stuff, he genuinely does.

Kristin's hand shot up. "If we were supposed to blur the line between who was leading and who was following, then why did we have to decide who was the mirror and who wasn't in the first place?" she asked.

This was the first day, and I was already fed up with just about everyone. And if I were Gellman, I would have blasted her. I mean, enough already. If she already knew everything, why was she taking the workshop at all?

"It's a process," Gellman answered her. "You don't do it all at once. It's a process. Let's take a break."

Kristin and Marty went with me down to the coffee place on the ground floor of Piper's Alley. As soon as we were clear of the Training Center, I started venting some of my frustrations.

"Why is he spending so much time on all of this basic stuff?" I asked.

"I think he's building up our skills for improvising the plays," Kristin said.

"The best way to build up our skills for improvising plays would be to actually improvise the plays," I countered.

"A lot of great actors swear by these basics," Kristin said. "I read this piece one time that the Steppenwolf actors used to play Give and Take for hours—literally hours."

"If you're so into this, why do you keep arguing with Gellman?" I asked.

"I'm not arguing," Kristin said.

"You are, too," I said.

"That's just how I process."

"Too much processing, not enough producing," I said.

"What were you expecting?" Marty asked me.

"I thought we'd be doing stuff like you did in your Skybox show," I told him. "That bar play you did."

"We spent a lot of rehearsals doing the basics," Marty said.

"For how long?"

"About a third of the process was basics," Marty said.

It turned out that Marty and Kristin were right—we spent the next several sessions working on basics. I wasn't sure where it was all leading, but I didn't want to quit the workshop. I wanted to improvise the half-hour plays too badly, so I stuck with it. It turned

out to be worthwhile because I learned a lot—especially the day we played Give and Take.

We had played Give and Take in the audition, and this time, Gellman gave us the same instructions: only one person is moving at a time, and one person must always be moving.

We began the exercise. I wasn't very focused on it, and it didn't help that Gellman kept side-coaching, "Okay, I see four people moving. Now no one's moving. Now two. Now no one's moving!" This went on for a few minutes, and then he stopped us. A few of us started to move toward our chairs, but Gellman said, "No, just stay up there. Tell me, how do you know when to move?"

Aaron said, "When you feel like it."

Gellman shook his head.

"You should move when the person moving makes eye contact with you and gives you permission to move," said Kristin.

"No," said Gellman. "Often, that's the mechanics of it, that's the manifestation of the communication. But what's really going on? How do you know when to move?"

I raised my hand. "When what's happening onstage needs to change," I said.

"No, but that's interesting. Change how?" Gellman asked.

"When it needs to be more intense, or funny, or serious."

"Let's try it again and see what we discover," Gellman suggested.

So we went back in and did it again. This time, I felt like we were doing a little better. I know I was more focused because I was trying to discover the answer to Gellman's question. How did I know when to move?

"Focus out. Focus on the person moving. Take your time, don't rush it."

Whoever was moving was behind me, and it made me tense. It also seemed like everyone was suddenly clumped up.

"Be aware of opening up," Gellman side-coached. "Use the whole playing area. Listen with your whole body—listen with your senses."

Emma was moving—gliding through the group—moving among and around and past our frozen bodies. I sensed her moving behind me. Then she moved past me, and I felt the connection between us as vividly as I had felt my hand get squeezed in Pass the Pulse. It was time to move, and the instant I did, Emma stopped.

I'll admit I was excited. I had never experienced anything like that when I played Give and Take. Now I understood why a group of actors might want to do this for hours. It was the same kind of rush you get onstage when you're getting huge reactions from the audience.

But we didn't get to play for hours—just a few more minutes. When Gellman stopped us, I didn't even wait for the question. I blurted out, "I know when to move. You move when the other person needs you to move."

Marty nodded his head enthusiastically. "Yeah, you have to be there for each other. You have to save each other."

"Careful, Marty," said Gellman. "Yes, you move when the other person needs you. But not to save them. Emma, did you feel like Geoff was saving you?"

"No," said Emma. "But I did feel the connection, and I felt like I wanted him to take the movement from me."

Kristin's brow was furrowed. I braced myself. "I don't think I understand the difference," she said. "If you're there when the other person needs you, how is that not saving them?"

Aaron quipped, "I don't understand it either, which is probably why I can't get a girlfriend."

Gellman pointed right at Aaron. "Now that's so true it's terrifying. Now that we've got it, let's do it again, and after that we'll add another element."

We played again for a few minutes, and I really could feel the difference. It felt like we were floating downstream together as an ensemble, rather fighting upstream as a collection of individuals.

For the next round, Gellman told us we should add an emotion, and to support this, we could use sound as well as movement. I was

eager to do this, and apparently everyone else was, too, because the minute we started up again, everyone really hammed it up. There were moans of despair, wild cackles of laughter, roars of anger, and sobs of grief. While we were frozen, a lot of us were laughing.

Gellman stopped us and asked, "Why are you laughing?" Most everyone looked chagrined, but someone said, "Because we're acting ridiculous."

"Right," said Gellman. "The laughter comes out of nervousness and fear. Isn't this interesting? It's like this almost every time I teach this. Eventually, we're able to get the first part, when we're all supposed to be connected to each other. But the moment we are asked to add even one element of acting or character—which, in this case, was a single emotion—we start to go up into our heads about whether we're playing the emotion properly or well. We start thinking about our performance, and we forget to listen to each other. Let's try it again, and let's remember what we experienced earlier. Be more aware of your partners than you are of yourself. Let the emotion create your sound and movement."

Chad began walking through the group, quietly sighing. I listened to the sigh, watched his body, and felt his sadness. Then Kristin took it from him, moving through the group and vocalizing a soothing "aw" sound. I thought this might be a little manufactured, but I focused on it and sensed her nervousness. Then Aaron took it, vocalizing with a low hum. Something about this low hum and the steady, urgent pace of the movement excited me. As Aaron passed in front of me I felt the connection, so I started moving.

I felt very full of happy anticipation, and I just started saying, "Oh, *boy!*" over and over again as I took big, slow steps and held my arms out to receive whatever it was I was going to get. Gellman stopped us.

"Excellent, Geoff. Did everyone notice how Geoff did that? He played it truthfully. He played the emotion strong, not big."

Then Aaron said, "When he took it, it was easy to give up the movement. I didn't have to think about it—like sometimes when

you're up there and you're asking yourself whether or not someone is really taking it."

"That's right," said Gellman. "So let's add the last piece: character."

I was excited when he said this. I thought, "Now we're finally getting somewhere."

"Let's start with a basic Space Walk—just move through the space, a nice, easy walk. Good. Now, each time you take the stage you are going to take it with a character you have seen in the last few days. Move as that character, with their physical traits and emotional life, and you can repeat a word or phrase that they say," Gellman instructed.

I started doing a character I saw at the train station in the mornings. We'd played around a little with Space Walk back in my Improvisation for Actors class, and usually our teacher had us lead with a body part as a way of discovering character through strong physicalization. So that's what I started doing. I started leading with my pelvis and swaggering a bit. It was all sort of based on this guy at the train station, but I couldn't remember him very clearly, so I started embellishing.

"A real character," Gellman side-coached. "Not something you saw on television."

I hadn't seen a character like mine on television, so I figured I was on the right track. Gellman kept us walking, coaching us to become the character from head to toe. So I added a shoulder roll, tilted my nose in the air, and developed a little bit of a pigeon-toed gait.

"Freeze," Gellman called. "Now, someone take it as the character you just created or any character you have seen in the last seven days. And add a repetitive word or phrase so that you are using both sound and motion."

I went first, taking big strides and saying, "That's awesome," in a high-pitched, nasal voice over and over again. I got a big round of laughs from the group on this—I was doing an imitation of one of the teachers at Second City. Once I got my laugh, my character quickly morphed from the swaggering guy to the teacher I was im-

itating. I crossed my arms and shook my head the same way I'd seen the teacher do it, and I took slow, deliberate steps.

"All right, just be careful about doing a character and not a caricature," Gellman warned. "Keep going."

I was really into what I was doing and didn't notice Kristin try to take it as I walked by. She took it anyway, and Gellman stopped us.

"Focus everyone. Start again."

This time Kristin took it. She seemed to be playing some kind of bird-woman, taking stork-like steps, craning her neck, and saying, "Aw, aw, aw." I tried to catch Marty's eye to share a laugh with him, but Marty was totally absorbed.

Emma took it from Kristin, striding through the group with her hands on her hips, nodding, and saying, "Mm-hm, yes. Mm-hm, yes."

That gave me an idea. I took it from Emma. My walk resembled Charlie Chaplin a bit, and I moved along shaking my finger back and forth and saying, "I don't think so. I don't think so." I was using a schoolmarmish voice, and everyone laughed.

Except Gellman. "You're veering into caricature, Geoff. Who is your character based on?" He was probably asking a rhetorical question, but I felt defensive because I knew I had been manufacturing stuff.

"I'm just trying to be interesting," I said.

"Tell me what's interesting," Gellman said.

I felt like he was laying the groundwork to nail me, and I didn't feel like getting nailed. Even though the work on these basics had been illuminating, I was still feeling frustrated that we hadn't gotten to improvising full plays yet. Besides, playing these characters, even within the strict boundaries of Give and Take, felt like the first time I'd had any fun since this started. And apparently I wasn't the only one who thought so, because the rest of the class had been laughing pretty hard.

"Maybe I need a clarification on what you mean by the difference between character and caricature," I said.

"That's not the point of the exercise," Gellman said. Out of the

corner of my eye, I saw Kristin impatiently shift from one foot to the other and fold her arms across herself. And it was either Kristin or someone else who let out an exasperated puff of breath.

Knowing that I wasn't the only one who was frustrated put a little wind in my sails. "Yes, it is," I said. "*You* said to play a character, not a caricature. I'd be glad to do that if you'll just define what you mean by character."

Gellman shook his head emphatically. "That's not going to help you."

"Yes, it will!" I said. "Just tell me what you want me to do, and I'll do it!"

Gellman took a step back, and then a step forward. And then he said, "The problem, Geoff, is that you were up in your head. After the lovely moments you created with emotion, you got up into your head. You weren't present for the other players. A set of rules about what makes a character and what makes a caricature is just going to give you one more wrong thing to focus on. Focus on the exercise, not on being clever."

I was furious, and I was sick and tired of getting up at the crack of dawn every Sunday to come down to North and Wells to play basic exercises for three hours. I was tired of Gellman's vague directions. I was tired of learning the right way of doing something only after I'd done it the wrong way a bunch of times.

But for some reason, I didn't feel like I could say any of that to Gellman. Instead, I decided to try to make him look stupid.

"So what you're saying is no one should be interesting on stage."

"No, I would never say that."

"But you want me to be boring."

"No."

"But what you're asking me to do would be totally boring to an audience."

"An audience's interest in you is equivalent to your discoveries. Do it again."

It crossed my mind that I should just walk out, but I thought I'd

look like a total idiot. So instead I sulked for a while, refusing to take and ignoring anyone who showed any inclination to give it to me. In my mind, I reran the contentious exchange I'd had with Gellman. By the third time I'd replayed it, my argument had started to lose some of its charge. By the fourth time, I was asking myself why I was so frustrated and wondering what I was missing.

And then I stopped rerunning the conversation and started to notice what was happening with my classmates.

Emma was moving through the space calling softly, "Come to me. Come to me," in such a sweet, plaintive voice that I wanted to do what she said. But another player moved first. His body seemed stiff with age as he shuffled along muttering, "Gone. Gone. Gone." Then Kristin began moving, her normally energetic body slumped and limp as she simply sighed over and over. Then Marty changed the tone of what was going on by jumping into action with a bouncing gait and shouting, "Buck up. Buck up."

As he passed me, I felt like moving, so I did. In a flash, I remembered one of the lawyers from my office, and I let his spine become my spine, his gestures become mine. I strode through the space like a king, nodding to my subjects, saying, "Nicely handled. Nicely handled." I did this until someone took it from me by clapping her hands over and over, squealing, "Pretty! Pretty!"

Frozen again, I let myself feel the energy of the exercise move around the room, transforming as it moved from player to player. And I understood.

It was the same lesson I had to learn over and over again. Stay in the moment. Don't try to think up clever bits. Don't feel responsible for creating the final product. It was the same in Freeze Tag. It was the same in pulling an object up from under my chair in the workshop audition.

Marty and I talked about it on the cold, four-block walk to the Brown Line train.

"I feel like such an idiot," I confessed. "I bet Gellman thinks I'm a jerk."

"I think he's used to people arguing with him," Marty said, shrugging. "It's funny when you think about it. We all talk about him like he's this big, scary guy, yet no one seems to have the slightest problem getting up in his face and debating him."

I laughed. It was true. We all swore we were scared of him, but we really weren't.

"The important thing," Marty continued, "is that you stuck with it and made the adjustments. That's all anyone can ask."

"Yeah," I said. We huddled into our coats against the wind. "Why do you think it's so hard?"

"Improv?" Marty asked.

"Well, yeah. But more specifically, the part of improv that's about just letting discoveries happen moment to moment instead of manufacturing stuff ahead of time."

"I dunno," he answered. "All I do know is that when I do manage to exist in the present moment and the present moment only, I feel like I've brushed up against something eternal. I've touched the divine."

"It's pretty rare, though," I said.

"That's what makes it divine. And I think the reason we can't do it all the time is because we're human."

We trudged along, and for once, I had no desire to tweak Marty with a snappy comeback.

CHAPTER 4

Objects, Environments, and a Trip Through the Imagination

EVEN THOUGH I WAS SOMETIMES frustrated with it, I found that I looked forward to the Gellman workshop all week. I also felt a renewed energy about my acting career. My parents still wanted me to take the LSAT, but I kept putting off signing up for the prep class. I didn't put off talking to my agents, though. They seemed genuinely happy to see me, even though they chided me for disappearing for so long that they thought I'd left town. They sent me out on a voiceover audition a few days after I saw them. I didn't book it, and I got in trouble at work for taking a three-hour lunch to go to the audition. I liked the extra money I was making at my job since I'd been promoted and I didn't want to get fired, but at the same time, I wanted to renew my pursuit of acting jobs. So I felt like I was in a lose-lose situation.

And it was winter. Everyone complains about winter in Chicago—it's long, it's dark, and it's really unpredictable. I think it's the unpredictable part that annoys people the most. It can be the middle of February, ten below zero, with a foot of snow on the ground and then all of a sudden it will warm up for a couple of days and rain like crazy. But when it gets cold and stays that way for a while, I can get into a kind of groove with it. Long cold spells are good for introspection. And it was during a long cold spell that we did object and environment work, so I was in a pretty good frame of mind for that part of the workshop.

In college theater classes, we never did object work. We used props. If there was a letter in the scene, part of prepping for the scene, along with learning lines, was putting together the letter you were going to use. If your character was coming in from a snowy day and taking off a coat, you brought your coat to class and used it.

I'll admit that when I went through the Training Center I paid very little attention to object or environment work, and we didn't spend a ton of time on it in class. We all knew how to toss an imaginary football back and forth, pop a beer can, and read a newspaper. We could create a basic environment—say, a restaurant kitchen—and keep track of where everything was placed: the oven, the freezer, the swinging door to the dining room, the big door to the loading dock where the waiters go to smoke.

Every now and again I'd get a pang of guilt about my sloppy attention to object work. As an audience member, I appreciated skillful object work—it enhanced the experience of watching the show. But I also figured it was something you developed in a mime class, and that seemed like way too much trouble to get into. I wasn't sure there was a real payoff to spending several hours learning how to walk in the wind or peel an imaginary orange.

Gellman greeted us by telling us that we were going to be taking a couple of journeys. He said we would have no real objects on these journeys—including chairs or walls. And they would be solo journeys—we would not be connecting with others going through the same exercise.

Everyone got up on stage, and Gellman warmed us up with a little Space Walk. I was trying to turn over a new leaf by just experiencing the simplicity of these kinds of exercises, so I just let myself feel my feet contacting the floor and the movement of air across my body as I moved around.

After all of the Give and Take work, it was kind of hard not to look at each other. As I passed Emma, I sneaked a peek at her, and we made eye contact. She smiled slightly.

"No contact," Gellman said from the sidelines. "Simply walk."

I became aware that just this basic movement had warmed up my muscles and deepened the breath I was taking.

"Let's go to the beach," Gellman said. "What's it like to walk on the beach? Is it sandy or are there rocks?"

I decided I should walk on a rock beach, because sand was the first thing I thought of, and I decided that it was too obvious. Then I realized I was doing it again—I was getting up in my head and planning out what I was going to do. So I decided I should go back to the sandy beach. "All right, Geoff," I said to myself. "Reconstruct what it's like to walk on sand." I wanted to take my shoes off, because I thought it would be easier to re-create the feeling of walking on sand that way, but I was almost sure that taking off my shoes wasn't allowed, so I didn't. But then all I could think about were my shoes and how confining they felt. I would never wear big, heavy shoes with thick socks on the beach. "Concentrate, Geoff," I admonished myself. "Sand, sand, walking on sand."

But Gellman had already moved on to the next thing. "Did anything wash up on the beach? What do you see?"

Last time I was on a beach, seaweed washed up, but that seemed a little obvious. Then I had a mental picture of a treasure chest, but that seemed cartoonish, so I tried to blot it out of my mind.

Gellman was still asking questions from the sidelines. "Anything you have to walk over or around? Any dead things? Any living things?"

I now had a mental picture of a beach crammed with stuff—driftwood, dead fish, a beached whale, a shipwreck, a bearded castaway.

I was also keenly aware of what others were doing. Marty was kneeling, picking up handfuls of sand, and letting it slowly fall through his fingers. Kristin, for once, actually looked like she was relaxed. She was walking in the shallows, playfully kicking the water. Emma was walking along the shoreline, looking over the horizon, now and again picking up a smooth stone to caress in her fingertips before pitching it into the waves.

After my epiphany about living in the moment and touching the divine, I was more up in my head than ever. I felt like my mind was a backed-up drain, and by doing this work, I was taking a plunger to it. Only, instead of clearing the clog, I was just packing the gunk in tighter. I kept walking through the litter of my beach, trying to ignore everyone else.

"What's the sky like today?" Gellman asked. I saw Marty brush the sand from his hands and look up. Aaron looked up, too, and frowned.

"You don't have to show me what you see," Gellman said gently. "Just see it. See the sky."

I didn't want to show him what I saw because all I saw was the glare of the stage lights beaming down on me. I saw the pipes from which they hung. I saw the black ceiling of the Skybox. I didn't see the sky.

I felt defeated. This was the simplest imagination exercise, and I couldn't do it. I barely listened as Gellman continued the exercise. "Feel the temperature of the air. Feel the wind. What's the sea like today? Is it calm? Choppy? What's on the other side of the water? Cliff? Forest? Dunes? Condos? Parking?"

He had us continue walking for a little bit, and then we stopped. I looked around the room. Emma looked like she'd actually been to a beach—her cheeks were rosy and her hair was tousled. Marty looked blissed out. I was certain that everyone else had experienced the exercise in a meaningful way.

"Did you make any discoveries?"

I couldn't listen to people raving about how they felt and heard and saw and smelled. I also didn't want to know that they felt physically different after the exercise. So I tuned out most of the discussion.

Gellman gave us a five-minute break, and I went to the lobby to get a drink out of the vending machine. I had put my money in and was deciding if I wanted a soda or water when Emma approached.

"Do you have a quarter? I have four, but I need another one."

"Sure," I said, handing her a quarter.

"Wasn't that amazing? I actually feel warmer. I'll have to remember I can go to the beach any time I want. Especially now that it's March in Chicago," she said.

The vending machine spat out my cola, and I reached down to grab it.

"I dunno," I said. "I must be having a bad day or something. I just couldn't concentrate."

"That's awful!" Emma exclaimed. She seemed worried for me, which made me feel worse. "Why don't you just tell Gellman? Ask for some help."

I shook my head. "I said enough stupid stuff last week to last the rest of the workshop," I said. "I'm sure we're going to start improvising plays pretty soon, anyway. Don't you think?"

"Maybe. Although—I know this woman who took a workshop with Gellman a few years ago, and she said they didn't improvise a play until they got in front of an audience. All of the rehearsals were this kind of thing."

"Really?" I asked. She nodded. "I don't like the sound of that at all," I said.

"I think it would be cool," Emma said. "I'm learning a lot."

I liked Emma, so I didn't want to get into a big argument with her, but I didn't feel like these basic exercises were getting me ready to improvise a play. In fact, I felt less equipped to improvise a thirty-minute play in front of an audience than I had at the start of the workshop.

"I'm learning a lot about patience," I said.

Emma smiled slyly at me. "Are you? You don't seem very patient. Just ask Gellman about the exercise," she said, watching people return to the rehearsal room. "I bet you aren't the only one having trouble."

When we got back in the room, I decided to take Emma's advice. When Gellman came back in and was ready to start again, I raised my hand and said, "I felt like I wasn't getting that last exercise at all. I was so distracted, and my brain was so cluttered."

I didn't know how Gellman was going to react, and he surprised me by being very sympathetic. "That's not unusual," he said. "Most of us have a lot of noise in our heads, and all of that noise keeps us from this work."

"How do I get it to stop?" I asked.

"Practice," said Gellman.

Kristin laughed. "So, we're supposed to hang out and go on imagined journeys to the beach?" she asked.

"You don't have to do anything nearly as elaborate as what we just did," Gellman said. "Do you feel you were completely focused on the exercise?"

Kristin paused. "I had a lot of noise in my head," she admitted. "But I just made decisions not to let it bother me, and I focused on what I was going to experience at the beach."

"Just focus on one thing at a time. It's like meditating: if your mind wanders, just take note of the fact that your mind wandered and then get back on track," Gellman advised.

I nodded. I wanted him to think that I understood what he was saying, but he must have been suspicious that I didn't fully understand, because he went on.

"We all do it. It's human nature. That's why every religion has some kind of practice that requires focusing your mind. It's hard work. Listen, you'd think an old hippie like me would have spent most of the 1970s meditating, but I didn't get into it until the last couple of years. And I thought, hey, after all of my acting training, this will be a piece of cake. All I have to do is look at a spot and empty my mind. Five minutes. Well, I sit down to meditate, and as soon as I get settled, I start thinking: 'I have to clean out the coffee pot from this morning. I forgot to mail the phone bill. I wonder if I got an email from Deborah. I hope so. I'm hungry. Crap—I'm not concentrating.' Then I look at the clock and realize I've been 'meditating' for all of three seconds, and I think, 'Dude, you are so screwed.'"

I laughed. Gellman looked right at me and laughed with me. "You know what it's like," he said.

"So, just practice?" I said.

"Yes, practice," he said. "And remember this: at any point in the session you can start over. Don't beat yourself up. Just re-center, breathe, and bring your focus back to where it should be."

"Rather than start an inner monologue about what a loser I am?" I offered. Everyone laughed, and as I looked around, I saw a couple of relieved expressions.

"Let's do another one," Gellman said, as we all returned to the stage.

This one went much better. Gellman took us down a street.

"What does the sidewalk feel like to walk on? Is it even or full of cracks? Clean or littered? What kinds of shops or houses are there? See the buildings. See into the windows if you can."

I found myself walking down a narrow city street at dusk. At first I saw old-fashioned carriages on it and started thinking of old, black-and-white movies set in the 1800s, but I just took a breath and redirected my focus to whatever it was Gellman was talking about.

The street was cobblestone. It was in an old section of a town like Boston. As I continued walking, I looked into small storefronts of shops selling candy, women's scarves, camping equipment, books. The air was damp and cool but I knew it was spring rather than fall, because the air was also very soft. I noticed several brass plaques on the outside walls of the shops, identifying them as historic sites. Looking closer, I saw the words MARSTON OLD TOWN DISTRICT.

I didn't know what town Marston was and wondered if I was making it up, but then I reminded myself that didn't matter and redirected my focus.

Gellman continued coaching. "Now you notice a new shop. It's a basement shop. You decide to have a look."

This I could see vividly. I walked down the very narrow, dark stairs to a doorway set three-quarters below the street.

"It's an old wood door with a brass doorknob," Gellman suggested.

The door was painted burgundy red, and the brass doorknob was intricately carved and felt bumpy beneath my fingers.

"You try the knob."

It was very loose. I had to wiggle it a little to get it to turn properly.

"And the door to the shop swings open."

I entered the shop. It was dim and smelled musty.

"No one else is there, and as you look around, you notice everything in the shop is something you are interested in. Hobbies from when you were young. Items you have always wanted to own. Items from your memories. There are tables and racks and boxes filled with interesting stuff, as though this shop had been filled with things just for you. You decide to spend some time investigating."

Over the course of the next several minutes, I looked through a large cardboard box filled with vinyl records like the ones that belonged to my dad. I looked through a glass display case of magician's props—magic rings, disappearing boxes, tops hats, wands. Along one wall were several large models of luxury yachts. I also found a large wardrobe with clothing I'd worn in the past, including my favorite jacket from seventh grade.

As we explored, Gellman continued to coach us. I had found this distracting during the beach exercise, but now I found it helpful. "Feel the weight," he said, and I found that the model yacht I was holding was surprisingly light and delicate. "Smell the smells," and I buried my nose in the jacket and smelled piles of burning autumn leaves and apple cider, along with the hint of a perfume I associated with a girl I had a crush on. "Notice the textures, feel them," and I ran my hand along the wood inlay work on a disappearing box, noticing how tightly everything had been fitted together and sanded smooth—except for the small, clover-shaped inlay that you could push with the tip of your finger if you wanted to access a secret compartment in the lid.

I'm not sure how long I spent exploring those objects, I just know that I was completely absorbed in what I was doing, and

when Gellman spoke, I was surprised. He guided us through a door at the back of the shop and into a long hallway.

"You look behind you, and the door has disappeared. Now you are in a long hallway filled with mirrors."

Gellman told us that the mirrors were reflecting parts of our inner selves—the good, the bad, the ugly, and the beautiful. And as I walked, I saw those images—me waking up in the morning after being out too late the night before, me with a grotesquely giant head, me climbing a hill and reaching back to lend a hand to a girl climbing behind, me with my hands over my ears mouthing, "blah blah blah," like some bratty kid.

"At the end of the hallway is another door," Gellman coached. He directed us through the door and into a forest. Once again, the door disappeared once we were through it. We followed a path through the forest, across a stream, through light and dark, and finally to the steps of a castle.

Once inside the castle, we found a table filled with our favorite food and drink. Here, we took a few moments to experience them. Again, I was surprised by how quickly and easily the images came to me and how vivid the sensations were. Gellman no longer reminded us to see, taste, or smell, and I didn't need the reminders. I chewed on meaty, succulent barbecued ribs and drank a long, cool sip of creamy-tasting root beer. Then I had several tortilla chips dipped into guacamole. Then a milkshake.

"You leave the table of food and enter a tunnel," Gellman coached. At the other end of this tunnel was a sculpture garden filled with sculptures made of light. He told us they each depicted an important moment in our lives.

I saw an overturned bicycle, wheel spinning, and my ten-year-old self lying on the sidewalk with a broken arm. I saw my dog bound out of my dad's car and race toward me. I saw the moving van pulling up to our new house. I saw my father in a hospital bed, scared and vulnerable, his eyes filling with tears when he saw me. I

saw both of my parents beaming at my graduation. I saw the lobby at Second City filled with actors waiting for their TourCo audition.

"It is time to leave the sculpture garden," Gellman was saying. "There is a long wall, and there's a door. Go through the door and back into the shop filled with your favorite things. There is another door at the back of the shop—not the one you came in through. You can go through that door, or the door leading to the street."

I chose the door at the back of the shop. And just as I walked through, Gellman said, "Good. Everyone can now take a seat."

I felt like I was waking up from a long dream, and like the theater was crackling with our collective psychic energy. I also felt a little embarrassed and avoided looking at anyone.

"That was crazy," Aaron laughed as he settled into a seat. He rubbed his head and shook it, as though he were trying to rattle away some of the images.

"It was like we were hypnotized," Emma said.

"I think that actually is a form of hypnosis," Gellman said. "What did you discover during that exercise?"

"It was a deeply spiritual experience for me," Marty said solemnly. "I felt like I was connected to a lot of things—things inside of me, things outside of me."

"I think I'm really disturbed," Chad said.

"The human mind is a powerful thing," Emma said.

"I was just relieved that I could follow where my imagination went," I said. "Once I got going, it seemed like the images were just coming to me."

I noticed that Kristin was sitting with her legs crossed and her arms folded across her chest. Finally, she spoke. "It was all very interesting, but I'm just wondering how it relates to object work."

That made me suspect that she didn't have a very good experience. I was grateful for Emma's advice during the break. It's hard to ask for help, but next time I'll try to remember that it's a good way to get out of your head and back into a state of creative flow. I was glad I'd been able to get that creative flow going with the object

work, because now I had a better understanding of how to create objects and environments onstage. I shouldn't try to create them at all, except in my imagination. The point wasn't to show my objects to the audience; it was to concentrate well enough that I could imagine and interact with the object. The greater my concentration, the more specific those interactions would be in regard to size, texture, temperature, weight, smell, etc. The audience's perception of the objects was the product of an actor's concentration, imagination, and interactions.

Gellman told us that the next week we were going to start working with dialogue. I always felt like dialogue was one of my strongest areas. Even though I had come to some kind of spiritual awakening about staying in the moment, I was looking forward to showing off a little bit with the dialogue exercises.

CHAPTER 5

The Trouble with Words

I DIDN'T LIKE THE WAY GELLMAN first talked about dialogue. I thought he was negating the importance of it when he said, "Much of what you do is determined by what is *not* said. In fact, most of what you communicate in life and onstage is determined by your behavior, not by what you say. A grunt can communicate much more than a poetic speech. A shrug can be more meaningful than a witty one-liner."

I muttered to Marty, "So Gellman's point about dialogue is that you don't have to bother with words at all. Got it. Let's go have brunch."

"I hate all of these rules anyway," Marty said. "They just get you up into your head."

We began by pairing up, and Gellman instructed us to face each other. Then he told us to make slight adjustments until we felt completely comfortable, as we would if we were casually conversing with our partner.

I was paired with Aaron. We stepped toward and away from each other a couple of times, making little comments like, "Hmm, a little far," or "This seems almost right," until we were standing about three feet away from each other.

"Now," said Gellman, "take several big steps away from each other, and just call out hello back and forth."

Everyone did this, and the room erupted into laughter. Almost

everyone started using a goofy voice—a lampoon of how people would talk to each other over a much greater distance than fifteen or so feet: "Heeelllooooo!" I heard a couple of pairs echoing each other: "Hello—hellohellohellohello!" Everyone was cracking up.

Normally, that was the kind of thing Gellman would nail us on, but for some reason he let us continue. In fact, he was laughing along with us and, at one point, even joined in on the echo bit. After a couple of minutes he said, "All right, return to your comfortable distance."

Aaron and I returned to standing just a few feet from each other. We laughed and muttered hello in normal voices, and that made us laugh, too.

"Now, stand closer to each other," Gellman said. "And say hello."

While the distance had felt kind of fun and goofy, the closeness was simply uncomfortable. I really disliked being that close to Aaron. We were both laughing, and I wondered if he felt as awkward as I did. We made fun of the discomfort, saying hello to each other in gruff, manly voices as we shuffled our feet back and forth.

"Okay, did you discover anything?" Gellman asked.

Kristin shot up her hand. "Anything outside of the standard proximity we're used to creates tension."

"Yes," Gellman said. "Anyone notice how that tension was expressed during the exercise?"

"Laughter," Aaron answered.

"Yes," said Gellman. "The silly voices, the faces, the laughter—all of that was in response to the simple tension we created when we stepped outside of the boundaries of what we're used to. Now go back to the comfortable distance."

We did so. Aaron and I acknowledged each other with tight-lipped smiles and nods of the head.

"This is what I call 'American standard'—in other cultures the distances might be different, but this is what most Americans are used to when we're having a nice, casual conversation. So let's go ahead and do just that. Just say, 'I'm glad you're here.' "

We did. It didn't create a great deal of tension—just a little bit, as I realized that I mostly feel competitive with Aaron and that I'm not always glad he's there. But for the most part, I could say it and mean it, and I could hear it and believe it from him.

Then Gellman instructed, "Say to each other, 'I can be hurt by you.' "

This was much harder. Aaron said it, then I said it, then Aaron said it again, and back and forth it went half a dozen times before Gellman stopped us. I felt weirdly embarrassed by the whole exercise. I didn't even want to look at Aaron as Gellman debriefed.

"Well, obviously I rigged that last one," Gellman said, and the room erupted into nervous chuckles. He continued, "Words connect us, and they are powerful. Remember that. Your words can sting, they can cut, they can draw blood. So make sure that in this workshop you are good to each other as we embark upon this dangerous business of dialogue."

Working in the same pairs, Gellman had us face each other again. "Remember that dialogue is only the by-product of reaction—the ashes of what just took place. Maintain eye contact with your partner for twenty seconds."

We did. It was a little uncomfortable, but not awful. But then Gellman said, "Now look at a spot—now back at your partner for another twenty seconds."

By the third time, Aaron and I were having a lot of trouble maintaining eye contact. He kept looking away, and I got the idea that he was judging me, that he thought I was stupid or something. This made me feel angry at him, so I started looking away, too.

"Okay, stop. Did anyone discover anything?"

Marty raised his hand. "It's really intimate," he said.

"Yes, it is," Gellman said. "What else?"

Dave, who was partnered with Kristin, raised his hand. "I thought Kristin was really ticked off at me," he said.

Kristin laughed nervously. "I wasn't, but I understand why you might have thought that," she said.

"Why would he think that?" Gellman asked.

"Well, my stare was quite intense," Kristin said. "And I never broke it once."

"I see," said Gellman. "Who else?"

I raised my hand. "I had a lot of trouble staying focused," I said.

"Interesting. What about your partner?"

"I don't want to talk for him," I said, gesturing to Aaron.

"I couldn't focus, either," Aaron said.

"Okay," said Gellman. "Let's try again. Twenty seconds."

This was the worst one of all. I could barely look at Aaron. Then Gellman said, "Now look at a spot and listen to what I'm about to tell you. Your job is to help your partner maintain eye contact with you. It's about supporting your partner. Go."

I looked back at Aaron and immediately noticed that he looked different than he had before. I think my face registered surprise, because a bit of nervousness flashed across Aaron's face. Then I remembered that I was supposed to support him, make it easier and safer for him to look at me. So I looked at him in the most non-threatening, accepting way I could manage.

"You can look away. The last one, by the way, was forty seconds."

I was astonished. It had seemed like the second round had gone much faster, like less time, not more.

"Pretty amazing, huh?" asked Aaron.

"I think of dialogue rules as multiplication tables," Gellman said. "You have to drill them so that they become rote. Let's do some drills. Go back and forth, speaking only in questions."

I find these kinds of exercises fun, and Aaron was a great partner.

"Why are you here?"

"Why do you ask?"

"Why are you so defensive?"

"Why are you avoiding an answer?"

"Why do you think I am?"

"Don't you see how you're acting?"

For the next dialogue drill, Gellman instructed us to speak only

in statements. I found it challenging, and it occurred to me that I had developed some sloppy habits regarding dialogue since I'd been out of the Conservatory.

"Nice day."

"If you like clouds."

"I do."

"Well, that's good."

"The bus is late."

"At least it's a nice day."

We were all pretty familiar with the rule about not asking questions—it's more or less Improv 101 stuff. But it was good to go through the drill, because I was reminded that the reason you avoid questions is because asking questions places a heavy burden of responsibility onto your scene partner. When you start a scene asking, "What are you doing?" or "Why are you acting like that?" or even "Where is the iguana cage?" you're more or less demanding that your partner figure out the scene for you. It's not only a selfish thing to do to your partner, it's a terrible thing to do yourself. Instead of revealing your character to your partner and to your audience, you turn yourself into an interrogator. And that's no fun for anyone.

Gellman moved on to the next drill. "All right, you're going to put the word *no* in front of every exchange and justify the use of the word *no*."

"We have to clean up the apartment."

"No, it's not messy."

"No, you have to help me."

"No, I don't, because you're not the boss of me."

"No, I am because I'm your father."

"No, you're barely even my roommate."

It doesn't take too many of these exchanges before you wish you were anywhere else in the world other than in your own scene, which is unable to move forward. That's the main reason not to do it.

The opposite of this is the "Yes, and . . ." exercise, which means

accepting whatever your scene partner offers and building on it. This little phrase, "Yes, and . . ." is the cornerstone of Second City improv training.

"Here's some candy."

"Yes, and it's my favorite kind."

"Yes, and there's plenty for both of us."

"Yes, and someone just left it here, open."

"Yes, and we can eat as much as we want."

Next we did a drill of statements about the past, which is really easy to do when you're improvising—so easy that I rarely realize when I'm doing it, so it was a good point of concentration for a drill.

"I went to the store."

"My father used to take me to the store."

"There was a sale on beets, so I bought some."

"Last week there was a sale on potatoes."

"When I was at the store, I thought I saw you."

"I was at that store last week."

And then, for the next round, we did a drill of statements about the future. I always think these sound funny.

"I'm going to Bermuda in November."

"There will be hurricanes."

"I'll pack appropriate gear."

"I'll go with you. By then I'll have my degree in climatology, and I'll help you stay safe."

"By November, I plan to have a girlfriend, and you'd be a third wheel."

"By November, I'll have a girlfriend, too."

Doing these drills, it struck me how much can go wrong when you're improvising. You can initiate something, and your partner can forget to "Yes, and . . ." your initiation. You can talk too much about the past or the future and get into a funky, inactive place. Your partner can start firing a bunch of questions at you, which can force you into making up details and talking about them, which will drag down the scene.

"Now, talk back and forth with your partner using present-tense statements only," Gellman said.

"I'm hungry."

"I smell hamburgers."

"Me, too."

"I'm sure I'm hallucinating."

"Probably, and that worries me."

After this last round, Gellman told us to take a seat for a quick discussion before moving on to the next set of rules.

"Discoveries?" he inquired, as we settled into our seats.

"It isn't natural," someone said matter-of-factly. I assumed it was Kristin for a split second before I registered the fact that it was a guy talking. I twisted around in my seat and saw that it was Marty.

"Neither is theater," said Kristin.

"I think the best theater is very natural," Emma said. "It's a mirror to life."

"Let's address Marty's concern. What isn't natural?" Gellman asked.

"All of it. People ask questions all the time. And all of that past and future stuff—it doesn't make sense to me. What would theater be without people talking about the past or the future? What would movies be, for that matter?" Marty said.

"But all of those speeches about the past and the future are just boring," someone said.

"No," Gellman said. "Marty has a point—you can hardly declare that Mary's wedding-dress speech in *Long Day's Journey into Night* is boring, at least not when it's done right."

"Right," said Marty. "We're cutting ourselves off from normal human communication. Would you tell Chekhov that the three sisters can't talk about how everything's going to be better when they get to Moscow?"

"Maybe someone should," Aaron said.

"Only if you want to ruin one of the greatest plays of all time," Marty countered.

"But Chekhov is a playwright, not an improviser," Gellman said. "Playwrights don't need dialogue rules."

"But I thought our goal was to improvise a play," Marty demanded, raising his voice. I was surprised to see him getting so worked up about this.

"It is," Gellman said. "But improvising isn't writing. But you are right. People break dialogue rules in real life. So why do we need them when we improvise?"

"Because the scene crashes when you don't follow them," Kristin said. "Time and time again, as soon as you start asking a bunch of questions or start talking about the past, the scene comes to a screeching halt."

"I think that's a pretty good answer," Gellman said. "Think of the dialogue rules as the painted lines on a highway. They don't tell you what kind of car to drive or how fast to go or even what route to take. They do keep you from driving into the ditch. The more you can follow the dialogue rules, the better. They help move your scenes forward and create richer characters."

Gellman paused. I looked over at Marty. He wasn't buying any of this. "Everyone up," Gellman said, gesturing to the stage. "Form into groups of two or three."

This time I was paired with Kristin.

"Pick a relationship and an environment," Gellman said.

"Brother and sister," Kristin said.

"We're in the backyard of our parents' house," I added.

"Now pick an activity that you can both do together. When you read Viola Spolin, her examples are whitewashing the fence or beating the rug. You get the idea—but please feel free to pick something you might do here in the twenty-first century," Gellman explained.

"Raking leaves," Kristin suggested. I nodded.

"All right, once you've agreed on everything start the scene," Gellman said.

I grabbed a rake and started to work on the leaves, and so did Kristin. We worked in silence for a few moments, then Kristin began.

"Let's make one big pile," she said.

"Okay," I said.

"Here, like this," Kristin said, showing me how she was raking the leaves into a big pile.

I sighed.

"You're sighing," she said.

"Yes, I am. You probably want me to stop," I said.

"You can sigh all you want," she said. "Just get these leaves raked up so we can start bagging them. Here, you can start."

Gellman was walking around from group to group, listening. After a few more moments, he told us to stop. He pointed to Kristin.

"What's going on in your scene?" he asked.

"Honestly?" Kristin asked. "Nothing."

"And why, do you suppose, that is?" Gellman asked.

"I'm just bossing him around," Kristin said.

Gellman nodded and said, "Okay. So let's add a new rule or guideline for our dialogue: don't dictate the action. Or perhaps in simpler terms: don't boss each other around."

Emma shot up her hand. "I don't think either of us was bossing around the other," she said. "But the scene still felt kind of flat and weird, didn't it Marty?"

Marty nodded.

"Let's see a minute or two," Gellman said. "Let's see if we can figure out what's going on."

Still standing with our scene partners, we turned and watched Marty and Emma. Gellman gave them new circumstances—husband and wife in their driveway washing the car.

"You're doing a great job on the hood," Marty said to Emma after a moment.

"Thanks," she smiled at him. "I'm working in a circular motion."

"It's good. You're getting great coverage that way. I'm going to

use that same circular motion when I buff the sides—like this," Marty said, as he started to buff the doors of the car.

"Awesome. I'm going to get some water to rinse."

"I'm going to keep buffing."

"Okay, stop," Gellman said.

Kristin jumped right in. "All they're doing is talking about their activity," she said.

"That's right," Gellman said.

"But that's another thing people do all of the time," Marty objected. "I know I do."

"Of course you do," said Gellman. "But what you do in normal life is not theater. Theater is compressed time and space, artificial dialogue, and heightened situations. It is our job as good actors to help the audience believe it's real and natural. And I think it helps if we believe in the given circumstances ourselves. The more we commit to the character and the play, improvised or scripted, the better we are able to get to that place of the believable."

"Maybe," Marty said. "But it's so hard to commit to unnatural restrictions on what we're allowed to talk about. It's like we don't have anything left."

Gellman shook his head. "There's plenty to say."

I understood what was bothering Marty, because it was bothering me, too. It's hard not to resent the dialogue rules when you feel like you're spending so much mental energy trying to follow them that you don't have enough left over to play the scene. But that's what practice is for. I thought Marty was resisting the exercises and that was keeping him from understanding the value of dialogue rules. I tried to figure out a way to add my insights about Marty's shortcomings to the discussion that didn't sound completely snarky. Fortunately, I didn't get the chance because Gellman said, "Sometimes just doing it makes it clearer. Pick new relationships, new locations, new activities. Go."

"We're a married couple," I said.

"We're in our apartment," Kristin said.

"Painting," I said. I leaned over and moved my paint roller back in forth in the tray, coating it. I lifted it up, shook off a little excess, and started rolling it up and down the wall.

I looked over at Kristin, who was staring at me. She looked very critical, but she wasn't saying anything. It crossed my mind that she wasn't saying anything because she didn't want to comment on my activity. So she started painting, too. She had annoyed me with that look, so I decided to paint faster. She started painting faster, so I started painting even faster. She went along with this for a while, then said snippily, "So. You're better than me."

I slowed down my painting. "Maybe," I said.

We painted in silence. This time our paint rollers were in synch. I looked over at her. She was concentrating on what she was doing, but I thought she looked kind of sad. Suddenly, I felt like a jerk.

"I'm sorry," I said.

She stopped painting for a moment, turned, and looked at me. "Me, too," she said.

We continued painting. I moved to another wall. The silence between us was heavy and full of sadness. When we next spoke, we started overlapping.

"I want . . ." I began.

"I can't . . ." she began.

"You first," I said.

"Jonathan, I don't think it's going to be that easy, changing what happened," she said. "Painting this wall is easy. A new color, a new point of view, a fresh start. Don't you wish it could be that easy? Don't you wish that now everything was different? But it just doesn't work that way. We can't put a new coat of paint on us."

I stood looking at her, slack-jawed. Where did she come up with that speech? We had been doing just fine, and now I felt like I was in a college one-act festival. Kristin, on the other hand, looked pretty proud of herself. Fortunately, Gellman stopped us before I could slide out of character and ask Kristin why she was writing speeches instead of improvising.

"Did you make any discoveries?" he asked.

"That was awesome," Aaron said. "I just realized that I spend an enormous amount of time in my scenes screwing around instead of getting to the good stuff."

"Ah," Gellman responded, sounding pleased. "And what is the good stuff?"

Someone else offered, "The development of the relationship. In our scene, it kept changing—or we kept discovering new things about it."

"When you follow the dialogue rules," Gellman said, "you almost have to explore and heighten relationship. Which should give you plenty to say. Right, Marty?"

Tight-lipped, Marty nodded.

"Avoid argument and mere conversation. That's how you keep scenes vital and moving forward," Gellman added.

It was time to go—another class was lining up in the aisle of the theater. We gathered up our stuff. Marty had already bolted out the door by the time I got my coat on.

I had to hustle to catch up with him, my breath making clouds of steam as I ran. It was a rainy day—the air was saturated and everything was dripping. Even though it was chilly, I could tell that winter was definitely loosening its grip on Chicago, partly because the dirty snowbanks were retreating like glaciers, revealing sodden litter clinging to the streets and sidewalks underneath them.

I caught up with Marty after about a block, and when I did, we strode on in silence for a while. Finally, Marty said, "I suck at this."

"Oh, come on," I chided him. "You're resisting it, but that doesn't mean you suck."

"No, that's what I just realized. I'm resisting it because I suck. I don't want to face how much I suck."

We strode in silence again. Then I said, "Look, I don't agree. And I don't think anyone in the class agrees. But nothing I say is going to make a difference. You're going to have to decide to stop beating yourself up."

It wouldn't have surprised me if Marty had told me off, but he didn't. He just said, "You're right, you're right, I know you're right." In a way, that was worse. He just seemed so passive. I wanted him to stand up for himself, to fight with me. So I kept coming at him.

"Resistance leads to bad work, not the other way around," I said.

"Whatever," Marty said, shrugging.

CHAPTER 6

The Universe Within a Single Point of Concentration

THE NEXT WEEK, GELLMAN TOLD us we were going to work on what he called Point of Concentration exercises.

"There are two things that make up the point of concentration," he told us at the beginning of class. "Discovery, and then reaction. And as an improviser, your three 'go-to' places for discovery are objects, the environment, and other players. Let's start with environment."

We went back to the kitchen exercise we'd all done at the auditions. As we started, I recalled my frantic, sixty-second cake baking. This time, I started by simply taking a quick look around the kitchen. There were crumbs on the floor. So I grabbed a broom from between a wall and the refrigerator. The dustpan had fallen behind the refrigerator, well out of my reach. I started using the broom to scoot it out. I had just started sweeping when Gellman stopped us because the sixty seconds were up.

"That was pretty good," he told us. "Everyone grab a chair, then line them up in two rows facing each other."

Once we were in place, Gellman told us to retrieve objects from underneath our chairs and to explore making a discovery about that object, instead of figuring out a way to use it. Then he told us that once we made that discovery, we should react.

"And it's very important that you physicalize your reaction,"

he added. "If there is no physical manifestation of your reaction to your discovery, does it exist for your audience?"

I reached under my chair and pulled up a book. It was a hardcover. I opened it and looked inside the cover, and I was surprised to see that it was a library book. I grimaced because it crossed my mind that it might be overdue. Gellman stopped us.

"Discoveries?" he queried.

"My object was my grandfather's watch," Kristin said.

"How did you know that?" Gellman asked.

"Well, my discovery was an engraving on the back. It said, 'To Andrew, my husband, on our wedding day, 1944, Gladys.' "

"It said all that?" Gellman asked dryly.

Kristin nodded eagerly and went on. "But Gladys wasn't the woman I knew as my grandmother. I was shocked to discover that my grandfather had a wife before my grandmother. And that made me feel betrayed."

Kristin was as sure of herself as she had been about the painting-over-our-relationship speech. So sure of herself that I wondered briefly if I was a chump for discovering something as dull as an overdue library book.

"That's all very interesting," Gellman told her, "but you're not really discovering anything about the object."

"Yes, I am. I discovered that the watch was evidence of a relationship I didn't know existed."

"And what was your reaction?"

"I felt betrayed."

"Betrayed by whom or what?"

"Betrayed by my grandfather. So I threw the watch away because I was disgusted."

Gellman asked, "Just tell me—what did you actually see?"

"The watch with the engraving on it," Kristin said, a slight edge of impatience in her voice.

"And what exactly does that engraving say?" Gellman asked.

"Well, like I said, it was from this woman . . ." Kristin began explaining.

Gellman cut her off. "No. What does it actually say on the watch?"

"To Andrew, my husband, on our wedding day, 1944, Gladys," Kristin said.

"Who is Andrew?"

"My grandfather."

"Okay. Good. Now, does the thought of your grandfather Andrew make you happy or sad—on the most basic level?" Gellman asked.

Kristin shrugged. "Well, I kind of made him up, so I don't know. Happy, I guess."

"So you don't really know who Andrew and Gladys are."

"Not really. I just made them up," said Kristin.

"But you did see the watch. You saw the writing."

"Yes."

"Pick up the watch again. Look at it. And read it again."

Kristin picked up the watch, turned it over, and looked at the writing. She didn't look angry and betrayed, and she didn't look like she was about to throw the watch away in disgust. Instead, her face was soft and melancholy.

"What do you feel when you read that?" Gellman asked.

Kristin raised her eyebrows in surprise. She looked up at Gellman. "Sad. I feel sad," she said.

Gellman nodded, took a step forward, and gestured toward her with his hand. "There you go. Great."

Encouraged, Kristin continued, "I feel sad because the watch is all that's left of Andrew and Gladys."

Gellman laughed and stepped back a few paces, shaking his head. "Up until there, you were fine. Your reaction is sad. The rest of it is playwriting."

"And that's bad?" Sarah asked.

"Hey, some of my best friends are playwrights," Gellman said.

"There's nothing wrong with playwriting, just don't do it while you're improvising."

"That makes sense," Kristin said slowly. I could tell that she was really thinking about this. "And I think I do it because I love to write. Maybe I should forget improvising and just be a playwright."

Gellman stepped forward, energetic. "No, the fact that you can write is an asset—a tremendous asset. That's why you're so good at the dialogue rules. Just don't get ahead of yourself when you're improvising. React to what you see, taste, hear, touch, and smell—not to the story in your head."

React to what you see, taste, hear, touch, and smell, I repeated to myself silently. It was so obvious to me how Kristin's writing a story got in the way of that, and I knew that I did something similar. I don't make up the story, but I do try to manufacture the responses ahead of time. But I was happy Kristin was getting this kind of encouragement. I was also surprised to hear that she was a writer. It made a lot of sense, but I wondered why she hadn't mentioned it before.

"Let's move on," Gellman said. "Put the chairs away."

For the next round, Gellman asked us to take an object off of a shelf. "Simply notice an object on a shelf just above eye level. Take it down in order to get a better look at it. Once you make a discovery, react."

I reached up, and my fingers closed around a very small windup toy ladybug. I wound it up and put it in the palm of my hand. Instead of walking across my hand, it simply bobbed up and down, which disappointed me. I rolled my eyes at it and waited for it to wind down.

Before Gellman stopped us, I was aware of other people in the room having bursts of reaction. Someone exclaimed, "Ew!" and someone else gave a mirthless barking laugh, "Ha!" It sounded forced to me, but I wasn't watching anyone, so it was kind of hard to tell.

"Good," Gellman said. He turned to Marty. "You need to physicalize your reaction."

"I did," said Marty.

"I couldn't tell what it was," Gellman said.

"But it feels phony to just make this big reaction for the sake of a reaction," Marty objected.

"Don't make it big. Make it strong," Gellman said. "You can implode or explode. It just has to be strong. And by strong, I mean important. Important to your character."

Marty nodded, but I thought he seemed worried.

Gellman continued, "If I was shooting a film and had you in close-up, I probably would have been able to see the emotion behind your reaction. But don't forget, in the theater they need to see you in the back row."

Marty nodded again. "Okay," he said.

"All right," said Gellman. "Let's move on to something else. Everyone find your own space to play in for the next few exercises. You're all going to do this at the same time, but you won't be interacting with each other. You're standing at the edge of a pond. Look across the pond to the other side. At some point, see something that makes you shout out loud. Go."

Looking across my pond, I saw a couple of kids playing on the edge of the water. One of the kids was a lot bigger than another one. The big kid started getting really rough with the little one. Then, the big kid pushed the little kid into the water. "Hey!" I shouted at them.

All around me, the other players were also shouting. What was interesting to me was how many of them were shouting exactly what I was shouting—the simple word "Hey!" But each one was different. Angry, flirtatious, inquisitive—you could tell from just one shouted "Hey!" exactly what the character was feeling. You even had a good idea of what they were trying to communicate.

"Excellent," said Gellman. "Now let's try another one. There is a TV in front of you, mounted on a wall. You have a remote, and you can switch back and forth between two channels. Go ahead."

I looked up at my TV and saw a cooking show. It looked kind of cool, actually. Some guy was putting a dry rub all over a steak and getting it ready for the grill. That was making me hungry. I switched

to the other channel. It was some show about a giant ant colony. All of these ants were swarming all over the carcass of a bird. It was revolting, but I was pretty riveted by it. I switched back and forth between the two channels, reacting to the cooking show and then reacting to the ant swarm. I was surprised by how easy it was to stay in reaction. Something about having the two points of concentration actually seemed to help me stay in the moment.

"All right, pretty good," Gellman said. "We can start to see how simply switching between two different points of concentration causes two different reactions. Let's move on."

I shook out my arms and legs to make the transition and focused on what Gellman was saying.

"Imagine you on the balcony outside of a high-rise apartment. You are very high up—thirty, maybe forty floors up. You step to the edge of the balcony and look over the railing. Look down. Keep watching until you see something, and then react."

I looked down onto the street from my balcony. I hate heights, and the first look made me feel a little dizzy. I saw a big FedEx truck pull up in front of the building. A guy jumped out with a big package and walked into the lobby of my building. I felt a surge of hope that maybe the package was for me.

And then I got stuck: I suddenly had no idea how to physicalize that reaction. All around me, I could hear and feel the other players reacting to what they had seen. I had to do something. So I made a fist, hit it against my open palm, and exclaimed, "Boy!"

"All right, pretty good," Gellman said, surveying the group. He looked at me. "What were you reacting to?" he asked me.

"Okay, first let me just tell you that my reaction was totally manufactured and completely lame," I said.

"Okay, I've been told," Gellman laughed. "What were you seeing that caused all of this lame manufacturing?"

"I really saw it—it was a guy from FedEx bringing a package into the building. I wondered if it might be for me," I explained. "And then I started making up all kinds of stories that it was my birthday,

and the package might be from my long-distance girlfriend who remembered it was my birthday. Stupid stuff."

"Okay, good, you have a really high level of awareness about where you got off track," said Gellman. "So you're saying, if I'm understanding you correctly, that as soon as you started to create a story, you felt you needed to indicate to us the details of those story elements."

"Yes!" I said. It was kind of a relief to have it explained like that. I could see that the other players around the room were nodding their heads in understanding.

"This happens all of the time," Gellman said. "We get worried. We worry that we aren't going to have an honest discovery, so we make up stories. Or if we actually manage to have a real discovery, we worry that our reaction to that discovery isn't going to be enough. Look down at the ground again, Geoff. See the truck pull up again."

I looked down. I watched the truck.

"Keep watching, good," Gellman side-coached. "Now, watch the FedEx guy get out of the front and open up the back of the truck to take out a package. Now, keep watching the FedEx guy. Just watch what he does."

I watched him, and I was now trying to see what size the package was and trying to guess from the shape what it might be. It was quite large, so the FedEx guy had to load it up on a dolly to get it into the building. I watched him enter the building and then waited a moment. Then my whole body relaxed, and I sighed. Nothing to do but wait to find out if it's for me. If it is, the doorman will call up. But I had found out everything I could by watching from my balcony.

"Fine," Gellman said. "We got it."

I was curious, though. "Got what?" I asked. "I'm just curious if everyone else got what I was getting."

"It doesn't really matter—we just need to see your reaction. We only saw you for a few seconds. We can find out the rest later," Gellman said.

"But what did everyone think my reaction was?" I asked. "Happy? Sad?"

Gellman looked over the group. Emma offered her opinion. "I thought you seemed . . ." she paused, looking for the word, "defeated," she decided.

I thought that was a little strong for what I was feeling. But she went on. "I had this sense that you couldn't see the package anymore, and you were resigned to not knowing what was in it. At least for now."

Gellman looked at me. I nodded.

"All right then, good," Gellman said. "Let's move on. The last exercise in this set. You can hear a radio in the other room. Listen to it for a moment."

This one felt easy to me, which was kind of nice. I concentrated and found that I could very clearly hear a currently popular song playing. Maybe even too clearly. I bobbed my head up and down a little to the beat and just enjoyed it.

"Now someone in the other room switches the station. Take in the new station, and then react."

I stopped bobbing my head, listened, and heard the new station, which was one of those loudmouth political talk shows. I made a face, shook my head, and let out an annoyed grunt.

"Great," said Gellman. "Now, let's move on. Take a seat—except two of you. Stay up."

I took a seat, and when I looked back at the stage, I saw that Emma and Aaron had stayed to do the next exercise.

"All right," said Gellman. "We're going to start putting all of this together. Remember, as an improviser, your three places to go to for discovery are objects, the environment, and the other characters. We're going back to the kitchen now. The two of you are in the same kitchen. Pick a point of concentration. Sixty seconds. No dialogue. And go."

Emma seemed to be looking out of a window that was on the fourth wall of the stage. Aaron took something out of a cupboard

and was inspecting that closely—a cup, maybe. After a few moments of this, Emma looked over at Aaron. He didn't look back at her, so she kept looking at him. Then Gellman stopped them because the sixty seconds were up.

Instead of asking the players what they had discovered, he turned to us and asked, "Who did you think they were?"

Someone said, "Husband and wife," and then someone else said, "Brother and sister," and then someone else said, "I was sure they were roommates."

"Interesting," said Gellman. "Do you realize that all of you are right?"

"Because we don't yet know enough to know," Aaron said.

"Right," said Gellman. "Later on in the play you might learn more, but right now, they could be any of the things you said. All of you are right."

Kristin said, "That's just how it is when you're watching a play, though. At least, the kind of plays I like. You discover who the characters are by watching them. And you keep making new discoveries as the play unfolds."

"Right," Emma said. "We make fun of the plays that start out with characters providing a bunch of exposition."

"Thornton Wilder made fun of it in *The Skin of Our Teeth,*" Kristin added enthusiastically.

Gellman nodded. "And our kitchen plays simply begin in silence. And gradually, we are drawn into the world of the characters. We make discoveries about who they are and how they relate to each other before the dialogue even starts," he said.

Emma and Aaron moved to leave the stage, but Gellman stopped them. "Stay up there a moment. Let me ask you two a few questions. Who did *you* guys think you were?"

"Brother and sister," said Aaron.

"Roommates," said Emma. They both looked at each other and laughed.

"Again, both of you are right," Gellman said.

"I have a question about that, though," Aaron said. "If I think we're brother and sister and she thinks we're roommates, sooner or later aren't we going to have problems in the scene? Wouldn't it just be easier if we decided our relationship first?"

"Yes, it would be *easier,*" Gellman said.

Aaron looked a little chagrined. "I just think that if we're both entering into the scene with different assumptions . . ." he started to explain.

"Ah. You shouldn't be entering into the scene with any assumptions at all," Gellman explained.

"Yeah, yeah, I get that," Aaron said. "But we're just doing this for sixty seconds. If we get into the whole one-act, sooner or later we're going to start contradicting each other."

Kristin practically leapt out of her seat. "No, no—it's going to unfold in front of you if you play it right," she said. "Just like in a great play—you find out as the play goes along. You don't know everything in the first scene."

"I think we're laying the groundwork for trouble later on," Aaron said.

"Laying a poor foundation," Kristin corrected his metaphor.

"Yeah," Aaron agreed. "A poor foundation."

"There's nothing wrong with starting the scene with one of you thinking that you're roommates and the other one thinking that you're brother and sister," Gellman said. "You just have to know enough to start the journey."

I started talking very excitedly. "Wait, I got it. It doesn't matter because . . ." I had this idea in my head about why this approach would work, but it was hard to find the words for it. "It doesn't matter how we define our relationships in a scene because it doesn't matter how we define them in life. It's like—I'm roommates with Marty, but every once in a while I have this flash of the feeling that we're brothers. Onstage, we're Marty and Geoff. The specific detail that we're roommates, not brothers, is secondary to how we react to each other."

Gellman nodded. "Yes," he said. "Because when you are creating

with pure improvisation, you are in real time with the audience. In a certain respect, the person who knows the least about your character is you. Your partner knows more, the audience even more than that. Simply because your partner and the audience have a better view. Two more up," he said.

I went up with Kristin.

"Remember," Gellman said before we started. "First, be aware of the kitchen. Second, find a point of concentration. Third, be aware of your partner. And make discoveries about each of these along the way. Go."

I went to the refrigerator to look for a snack. I stared at some cheese for a while and then decided to have some. Kristin was having a cup of coffee. I forgot she was there until I had my cheese. I looked over at her, and she smiled. I grimaced back. Then Gellman called time.

"What did you see about their relationship?" he asked the audience. We got an assortment of answers: brother and sister, husband and wife, roommates.

Gellman turned to us. "Who did you think you were?"

"Lovers," said Kristin.

"Brother and sister," I said.

"Okay. Fine. Now tell me—what did you see in each other?"

Kristin looked at me, and I thought she might be blushing a little. She stammered, which was startling because she's never at a loss for words. It occurred to me that she might have a crush on me. That made me so nervous I started running off at the mouth. I think my instinct was to set up some kind of distraction, so everyone didn't see how awkward I felt.

"I saw that she was a single mother, and she had a hard life, trying to raise two kids," I said. "I also thought she didn't like me—probably because I've been very judgmental of her." I looked over at Kristin, who by now was beet red, and added, "Well, she did get knocked up by some lowlife, and now the kids are stuck."

"Hmmm," Gellman said. "What did you actually see?"

"When?" I asked.

"When you were in the kitchen."

I thought back to when I looked at her. "She smiled," I said.

"Did you like her or not like her?" Gellman asked.

Now I felt my face getting hot, like I was blushing, too. "I don't think I liked her because my character was judging her," I said. "My character thinks that single mothers have loose morals."

"Where do you get that?" Gellman asked.

"I made it up," I said, and then added, "Right, right. Forget all that."

"Yes. Just go back and tell me—what did you see?" Gellman asked.

"She smiled at me," I said.

"And how did that make you feel?" Gellman asked.

"It was nice," I said.

Kristin laughed shyly and took a step away from me.

"How did you feel about her?" Gellman asked.

I looked over at Kristin. Her usual bluster was gone. Her head was tilted down and away from me slightly. She grinned at me, still blushing.

"I liked it. I liked her," I said. I had trouble spitting the words out, but I did it. I felt so stupid, so embarrassed, so exposed. Nothing I had ever done onstage, acting from a script or improvising, felt as hard as this was.

"Good," said Gellman. "Then on the most basic, primitive level you have a positive feeling as opposed to a negative one. All of the rest of the stuff about the single mother was just a story in your head. How about you, Kristin? Did you like him or not like him?"

Kristin caught my eye and looked steadily at me. "Oh, I liked him," she said.

I made another grimace at her, which seemed so immature, but I couldn't stop myself. What was my problem? I was acting like a twelve-year-old.

"What happens if Geoff or Kristin misunderstands what's happening?" Aaron asked. "What if the audience sees that Kristin likes

Geoff and that's why she smiled, but Geoff reads it as some sort of negative, like her smile is some kind of snotty put-down or something? Then what?"

"I don't know," Gellman said. "Then what?"

"It would ruin the scene," Emma says. "You have to be observant of your partner if you're improvising."

"Yeah," Marty agreed. "If Geoff doesn't get what Kristin is communicating, there's no basis for the scene."

"I don't think I agree," Gellman said.

"Agree with what?" asked Aaron. "That you have to be observant when you're onstage?"

"Of course you have to be observant, but I think what you guys are talking about leads to everyone standing onstage like gunslingers, staring each other down, never breaking eye contact for fear of missing something. You can't see everything. If Geoff misunderstands Kristin, that's great. Ninety percent of theater is based on misunderstandings," Gellman said.

"What's the difference between a character misunderstanding and an improviser who isn't paying attention?" I asked.

"The truth," Gellman said. "If you stay in the moment and don't make stuff up or race ahead of yourselves, you'll be fine. See, hear, taste, touch, smell. And tell the truth."

CHAPTER 7

Looking Out

THE NEXT WEEK WE CONTINUED to work on these Point of Concentration exercises, and we also got out of the kitchen.

"We're going to work in exterior locations," Gellman told us. "So let's get two up onstage."

Each pair went up and was assigned an exterior location for the scene: a park, a gazebo, a jungle, a boat, or a backyard. Each pair had sixty seconds for the exercise. And over and over again, Gellman reminded each pair of scene partners to focus out and make a discovery.

I was one of the last pairs to go up, and it was pretty fascinating to watch how people approached this exercise, especially after all of the work we had done to hone our basic skills and learn this point of concentration component.

More than a few of the players entered into the scene with a look of wide-eyed, almost childlike wonder. One of the guys looked at the wooden boards on the porch as though he'd never seen them before, and one of the girls looked at some leaves on a tree as though she came from a planet without greenery.

"Remember," Gellman said between scenes, "you aren't archeologists studying the ancient Mayan ruins. This is probably your porch. Your backyard. Assume knowledge, then focus out and make a discovery."

I went up with Marty. Our environment was a vacant city

lot. I started out walking across broken glass and weeds. Then I remembered I was supposed to focus out, so I looked up. There were huge buildings all around the vacant lot, and I realized I was standing in the only sliver of sun to be had. I smiled and tilted my face toward it, stretching out my hands.

Then I looked over at Marty, who was hunched over, looking at something on the ground. He looked up at me, his face twisted in sorrow. My hands dropped to my sides, and I took a step toward him.

And then Gellman called time.

"And what were you looking at, a dead body?" I said to Marty, teasing him.

"What about you? We were in a vacant lot, not yoga class," Marty countered.

"What did you know about him, when you looked at him?" Gellman asked me.

"I knew he was a buzz kill." I felt bad the minute I said it.

"So in that moment, you didn't like him," Gellman said. "That's fine. What about you, Marty? Did you like him? Not like him? In that moment?"

"Oh, I liked him. Even though he was kind of full of himself," Marty said.

That seemed like a cheap dig to me. I knew Marty wasn't talking from the point of view of his character. He was just trying to get back at me. I really wanted to go back to my seat, but of course Gellman had to ask another question.

"How did you know Geoff's character was full of himself?" Gellman asked. "What did you see?"

"I saw someone totally absorbed in his own experience. I saw someone who didn't even register that I looked at him several times. I saw someone who had trouble seeing what I was seeing," Marty said.

"All right," Gellman said. "Let's move on. We're going to add dialogue."

Marty and I left the stage to take our seats in the house. We didn't look at each other.

"This exercise is going to add a layer of reaction to the silent scenes we've been doing. We are going to add limited dialogue, and by limited, I mean one word per exchange. This might be a single word or a sound. Remember, a sound can be as expressive and as powerful as words," Gellman explained.

"How many exchanges do we get?" Kristin asked.

"We're still working in sixty- to ninety-second segments," Gellman said. "So probably not too many. But the thing is to stay in reaction and to limit your reaction to one word only. Avoid labels. For example, if I hit my thumb with a hammer I don't say 'pain,' I say 'ouch.' Got it? Good. Two actors up."

The first couple of scenes were pretty rough. For example, Emma and Chad didn't talk at all. They seemed to take Gellman's idea that a sound was as good as a word to an extreme. Their location was the deck of a boat. They stood together at the railing looking out over the water. Chad was eating something in small pieces—popcorn or peanuts. After a while, he shook the container at her and grunted. She grunted back at him. He shrugged and went back to eating. Then she pointed at the container in his hand, raised her eyebrows, and grunted again. He shrugged again and grunted. It all seemed so silly and forced, like they were playing Tarzan and Jane on a date.

Gellman called time, and Emma jumped right in. "That felt really stupid," she said.

"Well, both of you were indicating what you were trying to say like it was a game of charades," Gellman pointed out.

"But it's so hard," Chad complained. "How can you communicate anything except the basics when you only get one word to do it with?"

Gellman nodded sympathetically. "Yes, it is hard, but it supports you in the work of focusing on your reactions, not on what you are

going to say. Remember, dialogue comes after the reaction. The ashes after the fire. Don't try to manufacture. Two more up."

Kristin went up with Aaron. Their location was in front of the Field Museum. When the scene started, they were both looking straight ahead, presumably into the street. Then Aaron looked at Kristin, and she ignored him. He kept looking, and she looked back at him. He grinned at her sheepishly, and she made a disproving clucking noise and stepped away from him. He looked ticked off and stepped away from her. Then they were still looking ahead, only now in slightly different directions.

Then Aaron turned to her and said, "Sorry." But he didn't sound sorry at all. He sounded angry and accusing. She looked at him, full of contempt, and then turned back to the street. Her face registered seeing something, and she held up her hand and shouted, "Cab!" Then she watched the cab go by.

Aaron watched her the whole time. When the cab was gone, Kristin turned back to Aaron, an expression of expectation on her face. He turned away from her with a short snicker. She turned away from him again and muttered, "Great."

Gellman called time as the audience laughed. When they broke character, Kristin and Aaron laughed, too. They also hugged each other, which annoyed me. I wondered if they were going out. They seemed awfully cozy with each other.

"That was pretty good, guys," Gellman acknowledged. He turned to the class. "You see how much we get from behavior? We actually have a whole story here. Aaron did something bad. He wants to be in Kristin's good graces, but she doesn't think he's humbled himself sufficiently—"

At this Kristin broke in, "It has nothing to do with him humbling himself," she objected. "It has to do with the fact that he doesn't fully understand what he did wrong. And unless he does, he's just going to do it again."

Aaron grinned. "She's got that right."

"Fair enough," Gellman said. "But I have to ask, what did he do?"

Kristin and Aaron looked at each other and burst out laughing again. "I have no idea!" Kristin exclaimed.

"Excellent!" Gellman said. "Yes. Yes. You were focused on Aaron, not the backstory. Excellent."

Beaming, Kristin and Aaron went back to their seats. Kristin was "focused on Aaron." Awesome. That made two of them in the scene focused on Aaron.

We continued working on the one-word exchanges, and both times I went up, I felt like I did just fine. Not brilliant, but fine.

"Okay, let's move on to Crutch Dialogue," Gellman said. "Remember that our focus is on expressing an emotional reaction that comes from a point of concentration." He went on to explain that each of us would perform a four-line scene, and he gave us those lines:

"It's a beautiful day."

"Not for some of us."

"Stop, just stop."

"I wish I could."

All of us were supposed to use these same four lines, regardless of the scene.

Chad and Kristin went up first. Their location was a picnic clearing in a forest preserve.

Before they started, Gellman gave them a few more instructions on the exercise. "We're building off of what we've been doing," he explained. "Start with a point of concentration, make a discovery, be in reaction. I will side-coach you to begin. Lights up."

Chad started looking at some low branches on a tree in front of him, and Kristin looked off into the distance. After a few moments, Kristin looked content and happy—I thought she might be watching the sun set. Chad, on the other hand, was pretty busy. He was now turning over a leaf on the branch, and he reacted to something disgusting on its underside. Kristin stopped watching the sunset and turned to him. Her brow furrowed. She looked amused and frustrated at the same time. He noticed her looking at him, and he looked back at her. His shoulders hunched defensively.

"Dialogue if and when you need it," Gellman side-coached.

"It's a beautiful day," she said, her mouth curled sarcastically.

Chad let go of the leaf and wiped his fingers on his pants. He kept wiping them, apparently unable to get whatever crud was on the leaf off of his fingers. He kept looking at her the whole time.

"Not for some of us," he sputtered at her. He seemed frightened and guilty, like she had caught him doing something he shouldn't have been doing.

Kristin softened, sighed, and stepped forward.

"Stop, just stop," she whispered softly. Chad looked up at her, pained. He looked at his hand, looked back at her. Kristin held out her hand and gestured for his. Chad jammed his hand into his pocket. He broke eye contact with her and looked at the ground.

"I wish I could," he said.

"Great," Gellman said. "Well done. Now, anyone notice when I called for dialogue?"

"When we made eye contact," Kristin said.

"Yes, or even more simply, when you made a connection. And the person who begins speaking is the one who has the scenic focus. The person with the scenic focus is the person we expect to speak first. Two more."

Using just four lines of dialogue, we created a variety of scenes. When a pair of young lovers at a coffee shop said these lines, they took on a flirtatious, seductive quality. When two men picking up trash by the side of the road said the same lines, they sounded bitter and made me think that the men were prison inmates on a work crew trying to cheer each other up. And when two women getting ready for a party in their home said the lines, one emerged as outgoing and fun-loving, the other timid and self-effacing. It was clear by the end of the scene that the fun-loving one wanted to take care of the timid one.

In my scene, we were at the indoor pig pens at the state fair. My scene partner was Sarah, and she began by staring intently into a pen. I was looking at the door to my left, where sunshine and warm

breezes beckoned. I wanted her to go outside with me. I kept looking at the door and looking at Sarah, but she was too absorbed in the pigs. Finally, she looked over at me, and the moment she did, Gellman said, "Dialogue—go."

When I said the first line, "It's a beautiful day," I was pleading with her to tear herself away from the pigsties. Her reply, "It is for some of us," wasn't admonishing. She was almost poking fun at herself for enjoying the pigs so much. That struck me as pretty funny and made me realize that I liked her a great deal. So I walked toward her and said, "Stop, just stop," with a little hint of melodrama. When she said, "I wish I could," it was like the punch line to a joke between the two of us, so we laughed.

Then Aaron and Marty went up together, and their location was a clock-repair shop, where they both worked. When the scene started, Aaron went to work on a clock, and Marty went to look out of the window. They continued doing this for what seemed like a long time. When Marty saw something out in the street that seemed to excite him a little, Aaron sensed a change in Marty's energy and looked up from the clock. Marty looked back at him. Aaron pursed his lips.

"Dialogue," Gellman said.

Aaron turned back to his clock and muttered, "It's a beautiful day." He said it dismissively—his tone told me that beautiful days weren't for grown men with work to do.

Marty dished it right back to him, his voice hard and sarcastic, "It is for some of us."

Aaron looked up, raised an eyebrow, and said, "Stop, just stop." The tone was crushingly condescending, the tone you might use with a stubborn child. And then Aaron turned back to his clock again.

Marty didn't say the final line right away. He kept looking at Aaron, but Aaron refused to look back up at him. You could tell that Aaron knew Marty was looking at him, and Aaron was just withholding his attention. I knew that Marty should say the next line,

and I even knew what the line was, but I had no idea what was going to happen next.

Finally, Marty gave up trying to get Aaron's attention. He turned back to the window and looked out. As soon as he did, Aaron glanced at him, shook his head for a moment, and then went back to his clock.

And then we all watched Marty at the window, his eyes following the people coming and going in the street. It was heartbreaking, as though Marty was literally watching his life pass him by.

"I wish I could . . ." Marty said, his voice trailing away, unable to finish the thought about what he wanted to do.

It was a powerful moment in part because we had seen half a dozen scenes with these very same lines, and no one had used that last line as half a thought. All of a sudden, the line wasn't linked to the "Stop, just stop," line at all. It was a separate moment, a separate beat in the play. I felt like I had a much deeper understanding of this exercise—all thanks to Marty's ability to live in absolute moment-to-moment truth as this sad man longing to get out of the clock shop.

Gellman called, "Scene," and everyone actually applauded. I thought Marty looked appropriately embarrassed, and Aaron looked unbearably smug. But I clapped anyway. I was just so happy to see Marty hit one out of the ballpark.

I wanted to tell him, and I assumed I would get the chance on our walk to the Brown Line. But Marty told me he was going to go grab something to eat with Sarah. So I walked to the El with Kristin.

"I love that Crutch Dialogue exercise," she said excitedly. "I feel like I just learned more about writing plays than I ever have in an actual playwriting class."

"That's interesting," I said, "because the whole play was written out at the top of the class."

"Not the whole play, just the dialogue," she said. "I've always felt that plays are about behavior. Dialogue is only part of that behavior. It's so frustrating, though. Most people don't know how to read

a play. They don't know how to draw inferences. So unless you spell everything out in the dialogue, they screw it up."

"I was just thinking that it would be pretty tough to write any of the scenes we did today without it sounding like you were trying to block the play in the script: 'Marty turns, looks at Aaron. Aaron looks up. Marty looks away,' and blah blah blah," I said.

"I know," Kristin said. "But you know, the great playwrights manage to do it. They somehow put in the stuff you need to understand what's happening between the lines."

"Which is probably why it's so easy to screw them up. Look at Pinter. When it's a lousy production, it's unwatchable," I said.

"I have a friend in The Second City TourCo," Kristin said, "and she said that when they learn scenes to take on the road, they have to review the tapes along with the transcripts of the lines that are said."

"Really?" I asked, incredulous. "They just copy someone's performance? That seems kind of lame."

"No, no, no," said Kristin. "The transcript of the dialogue and the video together make the text. So much of the meaning of those comic scenes is carried in behavior."

"Ah, no wonder playwrights feel so misunderstood," I said. "You can't pass out videos with your scripts."

"I know I'd like to," Kristin said. "But that would look pretty stupid since it would be a tape of me acting out all of the parts."

"I'd like to read one of your plays," I said, and then I regretted it because of the way she reacted. She actually moved farther away from me as we were walking.

"Oh, I don't know," she said.

"Come on," I cajoled. Begging her seemed like the only way I could save face after getting rejected. Dumb, I know, but I couldn't help myself. "You can quiz me afterward to see if I got all of the nuances."

She looked at me, startled. "If you don't get the nuances, I'm the one who fails the quiz, not you."

“I just meant I’ll read it carefully,” I said.

“Maybe I’ll bring one next week,” she said. But I knew she said it to end the conversation, not because she was actually going to bring a play for me to read.

CHAPTER 8

Couch and Point of View

THE NEXT WEEK GELLMAN TAUGHT us his final Point of Concentration exercise, called Couch.

"Let's get two actors up," Gellman said. "And I'll walk you through it once."

Chad and Sarah went up. Gellman set up three chairs in a row. "Here's your couch," he said to Chad. "Have a seat. Sarah, you go stage right over there. You're going to be offstage for a moment."

We were in one of the big rehearsal rooms instead of the theater that morning, so offstage was simply to the side of the playing area. Gellman pulled a table over to the stage left side of the couch.

"Okay, this is your apartment—nice, huh?" Gellman said. "And here's the sequence you're going to play. Chad, you're on the couch. At some point, you make a discovery."

"A discovery about something on the couch?" Chad asked.

"Maybe. Maybe not. At the same moment you're making your discovery, Sarah enters with a bag of groceries, bringing some emotion from outside of this scene. As soon as she gets to the edge of the couch, she stops. Only after she stops, Chad, then you have a line of dialogue in reaction to your discovery. Then Sarah, you have a reaction to Chad's line, but you don't speak. Instead, you carry the new emotion of that reaction with

you as you cross over to the table, set the groceries down, turn, step forward, stop, then say, 'I brought the groceries home.' "

I was glad I wasn't one of the first ones up for this exercise, because I was pretty confused. And from the way Sarah and Chad looked, I thought they were pretty confused, too.

"Let's do a round. It makes more sense when you see it a couple of times," Gellman said. "Chad, you're on the couch. Lights up."

Chad sat on the couch staring straight ahead with a somewhat bewildered expression. Then his eyes popped open a little wider, and he looked on the couch to his left, then his right, where he found the TV remote. He turned the television on. Sarah hadn't entered yet, and Gellman signaled to her to enter.

And Chad dropped out of the scene to say, "But I haven't made my discovery yet!"

"Sure you did. When you picked up the clicker," Gellman assured him.

"No," Chad objected. "The TV was off and I was going to turn it on, and then I was going to make a discovery about my favorite show."

Gellman nodded gravely. "So, you were planning your discovery in advance?" he asked.

Chad nodded vigorously, which struck me as a bit disingenuous given we were several weeks into the workshop and this point of staying in the moment had been pretty well covered.

"Try not to plan," Gellman said patiently. "Because then you'll miss the moments of true discovery. You discovered the TV and that you could be entertained."

"That's it?" Chad asked doubtfully.

"That's it," said Gellman. "That's all you need. Do it again. Same discovery, just re-create it. Sarah, try coming in with an emotion, and as soon as you hear what Chad says, let yourself have a new emotion. Lights up."

Chad went through the same motions—looking straight ahead, getting excited about watching the TV, looking for the remote.

Then he exclaimed, "My favorite show!" It seemed pretty forced to me. Gellman stopped him.

"Sorry, Chad," he said. "You have to wait until Sarah stops before you say your line."

Chad slapped an open palm into his forehead. "Right. Got it," he said.

"And one more thing—avoid labels," Gellman added. " 'My favorite show.' Lights up."

Chad again went through the opening moments. Watched the TV, reacted. Sarah entered. She looked really annoyed about something. She went to the end of the couch and stopped, which confused me until I remembered Gellman had told her to do that.

Chad looked up at her and said, "What?"

Gellman side-coached, "Back up. Your line should be in reaction to your point of discovery, not to Sarah. Start again, and Chad, go ahead and make a new discovery."

"Okay," Chad said, nodding.

"Okay, lights up," Gellman said.

Sarah went back offstage, and Chad sat on the couch. He got a pained look on his face and shifted his butt on the couch. He reached under his butt and felt something. By this time, Sarah had entered and stopped at the edge of the couch.

"Crap! Crap, crap, crap!" Chad exclaimed.

He looked over at Sarah. Sarah looked at him and sighed. Then, she crossed over to the table and set the groceries down. Chad watched her a little apprehensively. Sarah turned, looked at him, and said, "I brought the groceries home."

Chad jumped up from the couch and said, "I'll help you put them away."

"Okay, not bad. Not bad for a first run," Gellman said. He turned to the rest of us. "Got it?"

We all nodded, but I wasn't sure I had it at all.

Gellman continued, "And look at how strongly Chad reacted to the grocery line—and that's another beat for the scene, or the

very short play, they just created. Let's go ahead and add that to all of the scenes now. The final beat is the reaction to the groceries line." He paused, and then asked, "What did you think their relationship was?"

"Husband and wife," Kristin said.

"I got roommates," Aaron said.

"I thought we were brother and sister, but she was older," said Chad.

"I thought husband and wife because she seemed to think he should be helping her," Emma said. "I don't know if roommates would expect that from each other."

Gellman turned to Sarah. "What did you think of Chad? Did you like him or not like him?"

Sarah looked at Chad and sighed wearily. "Oh, I liked him, but he's kind of . . . passive."

"Okay," said Gellman. "How about you, Chad? Like her, or not like her?"

"I'm very concerned about pleasing her," Chad said.

"Too much story," Gellman said. "Like her, or not like her?"

"Like her," Chad said decisively.

"Okay. Good. Don't forget to see each other and stay in reaction in the moment. Just like we did in the silent scenes. Don't lose that. Two more up," Gellman said.

Emma and Aaron got onstage. Emma took the couch. Emma stretched out and propped her head up on one arm.

"Lights up," Gellman said.

Emma stared languidly ahead—perhaps she was looking out a window. Aaron bolted into the scene, carrying the groceries and grinning ear to ear. He stopped at the edge of the couch and looked at Emma, his face full of expectation. She stretched and yawned and said, "I love this time of year." Exasperated, Aaron let out a gust of air, and his smile vanished. She sat up suddenly, her smile also vanishing. He crossed the playing area and roughly set the groceries down. He turned and said frostily, "I brought the groceries home."

Emma reached out toward him—conciliatory. "Tell me what you wanted to tell me," she said.

"Good!" Gellman said. "Good reactions in the moment. Emma, be aware that you took the focus away from Aaron a little bit when you sat up like that. Also, Emma, you more or less dictated what Aaron's next line should be with your last line."

Emma nodded in understanding.

"Two more up," Gellman said.

I felt like I had a much better understanding of what we were supposed to do now, so I went to the playing area. Kristin came up with me and made a beeline for the couch. I went offstage.

"All right, lights," Gellman said.

I knew I probably should have been focusing on my own character and my emotion, but I watched Kristin for a moment anyway to see what she was doing on the couch. She was looking at the ceiling, an expression of mild disgust on her face.

I came marching in the door with my groceries, and as my character, I was worried. As an improviser, I wondered briefly if I was getting bogged down in too much story when I thought about some specific money worries—I had splurged at the grocery store, and, on my way up, I grabbed a couple of bills from the mailbox. But then I snapped right back into character when I noticed Kristin on the couch, still looking at the ceiling. She said, "This place is a dump."

I was pissed. Was she saying it was my responsibility to find a better place? I gritted my teeth and marched across the stage with the groceries. Where did she get off telling me the apartment was a dump? I turned and took a step forward. Then I stopped. Kristin and I were looking right at each other.

"I brought the groceries home," I said. In other words, "Get off my back."

Kristin sighed mightily, crossed her arms and legs, and looked back at the ceiling.

"Scene," Gellman called. "Not bad. Geoff, you came in a little late, didn't you?"

"I was watching Kristin to see what she was doing," I confessed.

"Ah," said Gellman, and smiled. "Don't do that."

"I know, I know," I said.

"Switch places, and do it again," Gellman said. "And see what happens."

I got on the couch, and Kristin went offstage. I didn't even feel settled when Gellman called, "Lights."

I quickly noticed that the bulb in the fixture overheard was flickering. I was noticing that it was sputtering in a way I didn't like when I also noticed that Kristin had come in. "That's not good," I said, referring to the lightbulb with a quick glance.

As she crossed the stage, I suddenly felt concerned. She seemed anxious. I watched her put the groceries down, turn, take a step forward, and stop. I had the impulse to tell her everything was going to be all right, but before I could do that, she said, "I brought the groceries home."

Why wasn't she telling me what was bothering her? Why was she talking about the groceries instead? I didn't know what to say. I ended up stammering out, "Well, yeah, sure, good."

"Scene," Gellman called. "Well done, both of you."

"I think I get this," I said. "There's a Give and Take game embedded into this exercise, and if you don't nail that part of it, it doesn't work."

"Interesting," Gellman said, sounding a little surprised. "Explain that, please."

"Well," I began, looking over at Kristin who was nodding encouragingly. "I have my point of concentration in the beginning, so the audience is probably watching me. But once I say my line to Kristin, the audience is watching her, and they need to keep watching her as she crosses to put down the groceries. And that's where my energy has to go, too, otherwise I won't be able to receive the 'I just brought home the groceries line' and react to it."

"Right. You're talking about scenic focus," Gellman explained.

"And you're right, that the ability to support your partner by giving them the focus is built off of Give and Take."

After everyone had had a chance to play Couch twice—once on the couch and once coming through the door—Gellman said, "And so this exercise helps us put together the last several weeks of workshops. The basics build a platform to work on. The Point of Concentration exercises teach us to make discoveries and react to those discoveries. In order to focus on emotional and physical reactions, we have limited our use of dialogue. Now that we have these skills at hand, let's move on to stronger ways of verbal expression. We call it point of view dialogue. Like everything else we do, it's easier to do it than explain it. Two up."

I went up and saw that Marty was on his way to the playing area as well.

"Let's give them a 'where,'" Gellman said.

Someone suggested the front yard of a house.

"This is the same as before," Gellman said. "Get a point of concentration, and then make sure you have made discoveries about the point of concentration, the environment, the other character in the scene before you start your dialogue. Use the silent beginning to make discoveries and react to those discoveries. Go."

I looked down at the lawn and noticed an enormous, puffy dandelion ready to spread its seeds at the first breath of wind. I decided to rout it out, but I didn't have tools with me. For whatever reason, the dandelion was so irritating to me that I started digging it out with my hands. I looked over at Marty, who was sitting on the lawn watching clouds.

"Wow, that cloud looks like Abe Lincoln," he said.

"Marty, you've always got your head in the clouds," I said.

"You've always got your head up your ass," Marty said.

It was so rude and so unlike Marty that I laughed. That made him mad, so he crossed his arms and turned his back to me.

"Aw, come on, you're being childish," I said.

"You are," he said, which got a big laugh from the audience.

Gellman called, "Scene," and I was thinking we did pretty well until Gellman said, "Okay, a lot of your reactions were terrific, but let's look at where the scene halted."

Marty said, "It went right into argument—you are, no, you aren't—and if you hadn't stopped us, there weren't many places for us to go except some kind of fight."

Chad chimed in, "What's wrong with fighting onstage? That's dramatic."

Gellman shook his head in disagreement. "Sometimes the climax of a scene is a fight. But it's not the best place to start an improvised scene. Too often, improvisers jump to a fight to be interesting. And it works. It is interesting. For a few seconds. If you're in a game where scenes are edited, it's fine. But if you're trying to play through a whole scene, you're in trouble. You've gone after fool's gold."

"So how do we avoid getting into fights?" I asked.

"Only make 'I' statements. For example, 'I think,' 'I am,' 'I want,' 'I feel.' Also, don't forget your dialogue basics: statements instead of questions, stay in the present, say 'Yes, and . . . ,' and try not to talk about your activity. All right—let's go back to the lawn. Keep the same points of concentration. Go."

Once again, I discovered the dandelion and tried to pull it up. I looked over at Marty, looking at the clouds.

"Wow, I'm digging that cloud," Marty said.

"I want the property to look nice," I said. Marty stopped looking at the clouds for a moment and glanced at me.

"I like our home," he said.

I was still trying to dig the dandelion. "I want things to be better," I grunted.

"Scene!" said Gellman. "What did you discover?"

"I like this," I said. "It lifts the scene up out of pettiness. All of a sudden, we have an idea here that can sustain a real play—I'm the guy striving to get ahead in the material world."

“And I’m content with simple things,” Marty said.

“Yes,” said Gellman. “When you were fighting, we didn’t learn much about your characters other than the fact that you didn’t get along. Two more up.”

Chad and Aaron went up, and their location was a dining room. When the scene started, Chad picked up a piece of silverware from the table and examined it. He found a spot and started wiping it off. Aaron pulled out a chair and sat at the table, then noticed how the chair made him feel and sit differently. He crossed his legs and sat at the table with the air of a lord. Chad looked at him and grinned. Aaron touched his hand to his head as though tipping a top hat.

“La-da,” he said in a snooty guy’s voice.

“You mean ‘la-di-da,’ ” Chad corrected him.

“ ‘I’ statements,” Gellman side-coached.

“Right,” said Chad. “I think that’s ‘la-di-da.’ ”

“I wouldn’t know,” Aaron said, and abruptly stood up. He started walking around the table, making small adjustments to the place settings. Chad watched him with concern.

“I could go get more silverware out of the cabinet, and then we can sort through it,” Chad offered.

There was a pause. Aaron nodded his head, still looking at the table settings. Chad bustled over to a cabinet and started taking out silverware. He came back to Aaron with handfuls of the stuff.

Aaron reached out, took a piece of silverware, and held it up for inspection. “I don’t even know what that’s for,” he said, and handed it back to Chad.

“Scene,” Gellman called. “Isn’t that great? Do you see how much conflict you can churn up without fighting?”

Aaron added, “Yeah, that was interesting because I knew exactly where we disagreed about things. I felt like this could have just kept escalating in terms of tension.”

“That’s exactly right. Now, did anyone notice where they hit a bump?” Gellman asked us in the audience.

"Narrating the action," Kristin said. "When Chad said he was going to go get more silverware for them to sort."

Chad shifted his weight from one foot to the other impatiently. "I still don't see what's wrong with that. People say things like that all of the time."

Kristin said, "What's wrong with it is that a line like that paints Aaron into a corner."

"Yes," said Gellman. "Chad managed to narrate and dictate action all in the same line. The way I was taught, you simply don't do it because it is tedious for the audience. When we're trying to create half-hour-long plays, don't do it because it forces your partner to respond to your objects and your agenda."

Chad looked annoyed. Gellman continued. "Aaron actually handled it about as well as you could. He took it in, but he didn't get into discussion or argument about sorting silverware. And because he did this, the scene got back on track. A little silence can do wonders. Remember that. Two more up."

Kristin and Emma went onstage. 'Give them a 'where.'" Someone suggested the Lincoln Park Conservatory.

Emma looked way up, like she was looking at the tops of trees, and furrowed her brow. Kristin simply put her hands in her pockets and breathed deeply several times. Emma looked at Kristin, concerned about what was in the trees.

"I love the warmth of this place," Kristin said.

"I've never seen a coconut actually on the tree," Emma said. She looked worried, like she thought it might fall on them.

Kristin looked over at her and said, a little condescendingly, "I see them all the time in Tahiti."

Emma said to her, "I've never been to Tahiti."

"Scene," Gellman said. "Kristin, when you said 'I see them all the time in Tahiti,' that was like a great Second City–style short-form line. You know, when I first started at Second City, Del Close taught me a very traditional way of doing the first three lines of a scene," he told us. "The first line: I set up who you are and where.

The second line: you set up who I am and what. The third line raises the stakes, ideally making the relationship important so that you have to deal with it in the here and now."

"I *love* that," Kristin said, her eyes lighting up. It made sense to me that Kristin would like this structural approach, but it seemed a little formulaic to me.

"Well, if you do it, you'll certainly get a nice five- to seven-minute Second City–style scene," Gellman said. "But when you're trying to improvise one-act plays, it locks you into story early on."

"That's my Achilles' heel," Kristin said. "I'm nervous if I don't know where the scene is going."

Gellman said, "Kristin, you are hereby no longer responsible for taking care of the stories in your scenes. You are released from your obligation."

Kristin laughed, and I thought she seemed genuinely relieved.

"All of you," Gellman then said, "you are not responsible for the product. Only the process. Improvise moment to moment to moment, and the play will take care of itself."

"Since I'm a writer, can I rewrite the Tahiti line?" Kristin asked.

"Sure," said Gellman. "But let's reimprovise it rather than rewrite it. Emma, say your line again. Kristin, physicalize your reaction, and then say your new line."

Emma looked back up into the tree, turned to Kristin, and said, "I've never seen a coconut actually on the tree."

Kristin turned to her and smiled. She reached out, and they hugged each other. "It's great spending the day with you," she told Emma.

"Good," Gellman said. Chad raised his hand.

"But that wasn't an 'I' statement," he said, frustrated.

"It wasn't an 'I' statement, but it explored her point of view," Gellman said. "The 'I' statements are training wheels: when you get the hang of this, they can come off."

We continued to practice point of view dialogue in these short, sixty- to ninety-second scenes. Some people, like Aaron and Kristin, dropped the "I" statements and did just fine. Others, like Emma

and Chad, tried to use the "I" statements but weren't always successful and complained that it put them up in their heads.

I found that I was less likely to start intellectualizing if I just stuck to the "I" statements. Otherwise, I kept asking myself if I was doing it right or if I was off. Using the "I" statements kept me focused. I found the work exciting because I could finally see how we might be able to improvise for a whole half hour.

After everyone had been up a few times, Gellman told us we would finish out the day with a performance game called Postcards.

"It is essentially a three-person scene. It will give us a chance to practice everything we have been working on. We'll give you a where—somewhere the characters go on vacation together—and assume that you all know each other from home. Just as we have been doing up until now, start with a point of concentration, make discoveries, and once you've connected with each other, begin dialogue. After about three or four minutes, I'll call for you to freeze the scene like a photograph. Then, as if they are stepping out of the picture, each character will go downstage and send a spoken postcard home. The postcard segments give you the opportunity to explore and heighten your point of view in a monologue."

"Do we have to use point of view dialogue in the monologue?" Chad asked.

"It's tough to adhere to that completely in the postcard," Gellman said. "More important, follow the general rules: keep it present, avoid labels, explore, and heighten your own point of view through 'I' statements."

Marty, Kristin and I went up onstage.

"Let's get them a location," Gellman said. Someone said Florence, and then Gellman asked us to narrow it down to a part of Florence that could fit on the stage. Someone suggested a piazza in Florence.

"Oh, I love Florence," Kristin said, clasping her hands together.

I've never been to Florence, but I thought I knew enough to fake it. Statues, pigeons, tourists in leather coats. I figured I could handle it.

Gellman called the start of the scene, and I found a point of con-

centration in the coins at the bottom of a fountain. They were from all over the world. I looked at Marty and Kristin and got some change out of my pocket.

"I've got a great wish," I said. I held the coin tightly, thought of the wish, and threw it into the fountain. Kristin smiled at me warmly, and Marty shrugged.

"I'm hanging on to my money for wine," he said.

Kristin and I shared a quick look and a laugh. I noticed then that Kristin was running her thumb along a rail or a piece of statuary or something. She watched me watch her do this and then jammed her hand into her pocket.

"I love the feeling of history in these carvings," she said. I smiled at her again, took another coin from my pocket, and threw it into the fountain. She laughed. I took another coin and tossed it to her. She caught it and held it.

"It's for a wish," I reminded her.

"Oh, I don't know if I have a wish," she said coyly.

I wanted to start some horseplay with her, like grabbing her hand to take the coin back. But I wasn't sure she'd be receptive, so I just hovered in the moment. So did she. Finally, she held the coin up to her forehead.

"I'm making a wish, not a promise," she teased me.

She leaned forward to throw the coin into the fountain, when Marty stomped over, stood between us, jammed a hand into his pocket, grabbed a coin, and pelted it into the fountain. I yelled at him, "Hey!"

Gellman called, "Freeze!" and then asked the audience, "Okay, who do you want to hear from?"

"Geoff!" someone shouted. I stepped forward.

"Dear Richard," I said. "We were at the fountain today, and Marty got all upset about something. I don't know what's up with him."

Gellman jumped in to side-coach. "One, we just saw you at the fountain, so you don't need to summarize. Two, you know exactly what's up with Marty, so tell us!"

"Oh, yeah, he's jealous," I said.

Gellman said, "Great. And how does that make *you* feel?"

"Like I have to take care of him."

Gellman said, "That's not really how you feel—that's what you think you have to do. How do you feel?"

I realized that I didn't want to talk about my feelings, which is just plain foolish for an actor. Actors are supposed to create emotion and to use emotion to create. If emotions made me so uncomfortable, it begged the question of why I wanted to do this in the first place.

"I'm annoyed with him," I said.

"Good. Explore and heighten your annoyance with Marty."

"Dear Richard," I began. "I'm ready to kill Marty. No matter where we go or what we do, he finds a way to take the fun out of it. I have half a mind to ditch him and go to Belgium with just Kristin, because we're having a great time. Love, Geoff."

"It's still a little off," Gellman said. "Because you're still caught up in complaining."

"I know, I can feel that," I said.

"It's all right," Gellman assured me. "It's a fine line between stating opinions and dramatically exploring and heightening your point of view."

"Yeah," was all I could think of to say.

"The good news is that when you get it right, it's unmistakable. For now, let's move on. Who do we want to see next?"

"Marty," several voices chimed in.

Marty stepped forward. "Dear Luisa," he began. "I really wish Geoff and Kristin would get a room. Their own room, not the one I'm sharing with them."

Frozen though I was, it was fun to hear Marty get a laugh. Even a laugh at my expense. Or my character's expense.

Gellman laughed, too, but he still had some side-coaching for Marty. "Why do you wish Geoff and Kristin would get a room?" Gellman asked.

"They're all flirty and cooing," Marty said.

"What's that to you?" Gellman asked.

"It's annoying," Marty said.

"Why is it annoying?" Gellman asked.

Marty's face lit up with understanding. "Because I'm lonely," he said.

When I heard that, I suddenly realized what I should have said in my postcard—"I'm really attracted to Kristin, and I'm worried Marty's going to get in the way." I also had no desire to go back, do it again, and reveal that.

"Great," Gellman was encouraging Marty. "Explore and heighten the fact that you feel lonely."

"Dear Luisa," Marty began again. "I'm so lonely I'm ready to fall into a million pieces. It's awful to be single in Florence, worse than Paris even. I'd do anything to kiss someone. Or even take a picture in front of a fountain with someone. But I do appreciate the art. Love, Marty."

"Good job," Gellman said. "Kristin?"

Kristin stepped forward. I felt nervous about what she was going to say. Was she going to complain about Marty, too? Was she going to say something about us? What if she said, "Geoff is totally into me, but I think he's kind of a moron and not very attractive." I could hear my heart thumping.

"Dear Suze," Kristin began. "I feel like a different person in Florence. Foods taste different on my tongue, smells are richer, and the colors—the colors hit my eyes and enter my spirit with a vibrancy I didn't know was possible. I feel the colors. I hear the smells. I touch the tastes. I know I sound giddy, but I feel more alive here. I feel strong and brilliant, and I'm almost afraid to say it—beautiful and a little sexy. *Viva Italia!* Love, Kristin."

The last words hung in the silence. Then the audience applauded. Marty and I joined in. So did Gellman.

"Too writerly?" Kristin asked.

"It wasn't 'too' anything," Gellman said. "Well done."

Marty, Kristin, and I decided to grab something to eat after class. As we walked to the coffee shop, I was aware of how much time had passed since that first, cold rehearsal. Now it was late summer. The sunshine was warm, and the sky was filled with lazy clouds. All along Wells Street people were walking dogs, rollerblading, ambling to the beach, pushing baby strollers. A brisk wind off of Lake Michigan brought the slightest hint of approaching autumn on its cool gusts.

"We only have a couple more workshops before the showcase," I said.

"I think we're ready," Kristin said.

Marty nodded. "He's probably going to run us through a couple more exercises to work on scenic focus and structure, which I have to say was the most abstract part of this whole process for me. I'm hoping I'll understand it a little better this time."

"I'm looking forward to it," I said. "I haven't been in front of an audience in a while. Once this is over, I'm going to start auditioning again."

"You should," said Marty.

"So should you," I said.

Marty changed the subject. "You know, I think I like the beginning parts of this the best. When I did *Liquid Lunch,* I felt like I was missing something I needed in order to do this. I can get that moment-to-moment thing going, and I like it. But in the whole play, I get lost."

"I think the best way to do this would be to set some story beats," Kristin said confidently. "Like *Commedia dell'Arte.* That was all improvised, but they improvised off of the stock characters and scenarios."

"But where's the challenge in that?" I asked.

"Challenge is fine for rehearsal, but when you get up in front of an audience, they don't care about our process. They want product," Kristin said.

"The most exciting thing of all would be to create that product right in front of their very eyes. In real time. Never before seen, never to be seen again," I said.

Kristin wasn't buying it. "Well, I wouldn't mind working with set characters and story beats. It's still improvising," she insisted.

"Ah, wimp improvising," I said. "No guts, no glory. Fly without a net."

"Leap, and the net will appear," said Marty.

"That's worked out for you guys, then?" Kristin asked, raising an eyebrow.

Marty and I laughed, although somewhat nervously.

After lunch, on the way to the El, Marty told me that he had applied to a couple of graduate-school programs, and if he got accepted to any of them, he'd probably leave Chicago.

"What are you going to get in graduate school that you aren't getting by taking classes or workshops?" I asked.

"I'm not applying to theater programs," Marty said. "I'm looking at education programs. I want to work with kids using improvisation."

"You're giving up," I announced, my voice edgy with accusation. "That's it, you're giving up."

"I'm not giving up anything," Marty said.

"If you would just . . ." I began.

"Try to grow some talent?" Marty asked. "Been there, done that. I'm over it."

I said nothing, but I silently wished that Marty wouldn't get accepted anywhere, confident that I had only his best interests at heart.

CHAPTER 9

A Small Town Called Henry

THE NEXT CLASS WE WORKED WITH an exercise Gellman called a Henry. It was named after a small town in downstate Illinois. The idea was that six performers would create twelve two-person scenes that all took place in a small town.

"Let's get six of you in the front row," Gellman said. Marty, Emma, Aaron, Sarah, Chad, and this other guy, Dave, all went to the front row. "I'm going to talk you through this round," Gellman said. "You're going to do two rounds of short scenes, about sixty seconds each. And they're all going to take place in a small town. Someone give me the name of the town."

"Rainelle," someone called out.

"Okay then," Gellman said. "Now we need six locations in Rainelle."

We put together the list of six locations: the post office, the backyard of a home, a coffee shop, a park, the railroad station, and the running track at the high school.

Gellman continued explaining: "When you change scenes, one character remains and one new character comes in. In each round, each actor plays two scenes, except the actor who plays the first scene and comes back to do the last scene. Two up."

Marty and Emma went onstage. "So, it's like this," Gellman continued. "Marty and Emma will do the first scene in the post office. Then Marty goes back to his seat, and then Chad comes

in for the scene in the backyard with Emma. Then in the third scene in the coffee shop, Emma goes, Chad stays, and someone else comes in."

Gellman looked over the room, and we nodded our heads in understanding. It was set up like a play I had studied in college, *La Ronde.*

Gellman said, "Like I said, I'll talk you through the first round, and after that, you should be able to play the second round without the side-coaching. What's most important is that you explore and heighten each relationship. Each character in each scene is building more and more knowledge about their character. Whatever Emma learns with Marty in the first scene is carried into the next scene with Chad. Those of you in the front row are learning, too. After all, this is Rainelle, a small town where everyone knows everyone and everyone's business. Let's begin. The post office. Go."

Emma marched up to Marty and started talking. "Hey, Jerry," she said. "I have to get this package to my cousin. I ran all the way here to get here before five o'clock when the truck comes."

"You better set down a minute," Marty responded. "You're all out of breath."

There was an awkward pause. Then Marty added, in an apparent attempt to get back to point of view dialogue, "I'm concerned."

"Let's start again," Gellman said.

"Can we?" Emma asked, relieved. "We just threw out everything we learned."

"Old habits die hard," Gellman said. "Just start in silence. Forget what you just did. Keep the post office. Go."

This time, Emma simply walked up to Marty and handed him a package. It was interesting that the first time she did it, she mentioned a package but hadn't been holding one. The package she handed to Marty was about the size of a shoebox. He took it from her, and he seemed surprised that it was heavier than he expected. He turned it over, and that made Emma tense. He looked at her, then put the package on a scale.

"Dialogue when you're ready," Gellman side-coached.

Marty carefully lifted the package from the scale, pulled a stamp from a machine, licked the stamp, and affixed it. Then he said, "Singapore is pretty hot this time of year. Any perishables are likely to perish."

Flustered, Emma said, "I've just got some books for Tom in there. Spy novels. He misses them."

Marty nodded, put the package aside. "I'm sure that's not all he misses," he said gently.

Emma glared at Marty, and he said quickly, "I beg your pardon."

"Scene," called Gellman. "Backyard."

Chad went up and stood in front of Emma. He started looking around on the ground. He found a pebble and threw it up at a second-floor window of the house. Emma simply stood behind him, watching him. Chad threw two stones, and as he reached for the third, Emma said, "Lyle."

Chad spun around. Surprised, he looked back and forth from Emma to the window. "I want to talk," he said.

"I'm right here," Emma said.

"I love you," Chad said.

Emma's eyes widened. She stepped forward. For an instant, I wondered if she was going to kiss him. Instead, she pushed him away, both hands firmly shoving his chest. Then she strode to the house, saying over her shoulder, "I'll see you inside."

"Scene," called Gellman. "Coffee shop."

Emma went back to her seat, and Aaron went up. Chad grabbed a chair, sat down, and started eating something with a fork. He took a sip of coffee. It was all very diffuse and busy.

"Find a point of concentration," Gellman side-coached. Chad focused on the coffee. He stared into the bottom of the cup and then took a last sip, draining it.

Aaron entered the scene at that point, carrying a coffee pot. He filled Chad's cup. Chad lifted the cup and raised it to Marty in a silent toast. Aaron smiled back at him smugly.

"Tom's going to string you up when he finds out," Aaron said.

"Yeah, well, whatever," Chad said.

"Although, I have to say she's worth it. The whole town wants her," Aaron said.

"I'm not afraid of Tom," Chad said.

Watching it, I could see how Aaron had just cut off several routes into the heart of the scene. Instead of discovering the relationship between the two of them, he was pushing plot. As a result, we weren't learning much about his character, except that he seemed to want to needle Chad.

"Scene," called Gellman. "The park."

Sarah went up with Aaron, and the two of them looked out over the park contentedly. After a moment, they looked at each other and smiled, and Sarah held out her hand. Aaron took it. After a moment, he said, "I feel very lucky."

Sarah grimaced, squeezed his hand, and then dropped it and turned away.

He stared at her back a moment. Then he said, "I do. I feel lucky." She didn't reply.

"Scene," called Gellman. "Railroad station."

Dave went up with Sarah, who stood holding a suitcase. She looked down at the handle of the suitcase, and she ran her thumb along it over and over. Dave looked down the tracks intently. When he saw there was no train coming, he looked over at Sarah. She looked up at him. He rubbed his hand on his chin and looked back down the tracks.

"This town is part of my blood and my flesh," she said.

Dave kept looking down the tracks as he said, "Right now, I'm just waiting for the train."

"Scene," called Gellman. "Track at the high school."

Marty went up with Dave. He was clutching the package from the first scene. Dave was kicking at something on the ground with his foot. Marty was looking at Dave, and then Dave looked up at him.

"Whatcha got there?" Dave asked.

"Carol tried to mail this to Tom," Marty said.

"In Singapore?" Dave asked.

Marty nodded. "I know what's in it," he said.

Dave looked at the package. He held out his hands for it and took it from Marty. He registered surprise at the weight of it.

"She said it was books," Marty said. "Spy novels."

"Like hell," Dave said.

"Scene," called Gellman. "Round two."

As they went through round two, I noticed that if they established their points of concentration, made a discovery, and allowed a little silence, it went pretty well. When they overworked the plot in the first round of scenes, the second round fell apart. Even little glitches came back to haunt the players.

For example, in the first round of the scene, Marty and Emma threw most of their energy and focus into the package getting mailed to Tom. In the second round, picking up the action the moment after the first scene, they started talking about the package again. Emma said, "Well, I hope that doesn't take as long as the last one did."

Marty got the scene on track when he took his focus off of the package. He watched Emma, concerned, and she glared at him just as she had in the first scene. Marty said, "I see how unhappy you are, and I want you to trust me so I can help you."

The second scene, in the backyard, went great. Again, they picked it up the moment after the first one. Chad stepped forward, grabbed Emma's arm, and said, "If I go in that house, I'm not leaving until morning."

Emma shook her arm free and stepped away from Chad. Again, it looked like they were going to kiss each other—Chad actually leaned forward to do it. When he did, Emma turned away, put her face in her hands, and cried out, "I'm so ashamed! I hate myself!"

Chad turned and muttered, "Smooth."

There was a pause as Emma hugged herself and retreated into her own thoughts and Chad contemplated his next move. Then

softly, quietly, like a stalking cat, he sidled up to her, put his arms around her, and crooned, "I'm not ashamed that I love you."

The third scene, in the coffee shop, was really rough. Chad and Aaron had no idea what to do. Chad went back to eating his pie and drinking his coffee, and Aaron glowered at him. Finally, Chad said, "I love blueberry pie," and Aaron nodded menacingly. It seemed to me that Aaron was trying to salvage the scene by playing an extreme attitude, but it fell pretty flat.

The fourth scene in the park had problems, too, even though Sarah and Aaron had established a strong relationship in the first scene. But once again, Aaron pushed plot. He started the scene by recalling the last moment of the first scene, asking, "You don't feel lucky?"

Sarah looked at him helplessly and said, "Sometimes, but . . ."

Then Aaron swooped in to her, hugging her, saying, "It'll happen, we'll just try again. We don't need a baby to be happy. We have us."

I felt like I could actually see Sarah go up into her head. If she agreed with that statement, the scene hit a dead end. If she disagreed, that was argument and breaking a dialogue rule. So she nodded limply. And then they had several beats of leaden silence during which neither of them could figure out what to do next.

The fifth scene, in the railway station, was most interesting to me. I had been a little mystified in the first scene—it was hard to tell relationship or any specifics about what was going on. They started with Sarah still clutching her suitcase and Dave looking down the tracks. Finally, Sarah said, "I feel guilty."

Dave said, "I want you to go."

Sarah was stung. She abruptly walked to the tracks, looking down them for the train. Then she turned to Dave and snapped, "I'm perfectly capable of waiting by myself."

The sixth and final scene, between Dave and Marty, had to deal with the package again. I realized that Dave and Marty had an enormous amount of pressure to open the package and more or less tell the audience what was in it. They went through a lot of business

about setting the package on the ground and then a lot of, "You open it," and, "No, we shouldn't." Finally, Marty opened the crazy thing. Then they both made a lot of "whoa" noises. Then there was an awkward pause, and Dave, at a total loss, simply said, "Gold!"

Everyone laughed, but we were laughing at Marty and Dave's predicament, rather than anything that was happening between the characters.

During the discussion after the exercise, Gellman commented, "Let's talk about objects. You often use an object as a point of concentration, but you can set up problems when you start handing objects to your partner."

"The package!" Marty said ruefully.

"Yes, the package. A perfectly reasonable object to bring into a post office, not to push onto your partner," Gellman pointed out.

"It's a question," Marty said. "A physical question."

"Right," said Dave. "And we were still trying to answer that question in the last scene. I was completely up in my head trying to figure out what could be in that package that was heavy and that was important enough for Marty's character to drag all the way down to the high school track. I had no idea who we were to each other."

"That happened to me in my scene," Sarah chimed in. "During the first round, I had no idea who we were."

"I'm glad you brought that up," Gellman said. "Because by the second round, you did great. You kept your points of concentration, and you stayed truthful moment to moment."

"And so we discovered it by the second round," Dave said. "We were husband and wife."

"I thought we were brother and sister," Sarah said, disappointed.

"That doesn't matter," Gellman assured her quickly. He directed his next question to the class, "What did we know about these two?"

"Sarah's character was going away, and she wanted Dave to talk her into staying. He was jealous about her leaving but too proud and stubborn to admit it," Kristin summarized. Sarah and Dave nodded vigorously.

"That's the stuff that keeps you moving forward in a scene," Gellman said. "Not that you're brother and sister or husband and wife. And you got to the important stuff because you kept your focus exactly where it needed to be, moment to moment."

We did a couple more rounds of Henry plays, and even with occasional bumps, I loved performing them and I loved watching them. I saw all of the elements we had been learning since the beginning of the workshop come together, which was satisfying.

Kristin and I stopped for coffee after the class, and I told her I felt pretty confident about performing the improvised one-acts for the showcase.

"That's fine, but I think we're riding for a fall," Kristin said grimly. "Those Henrys make it seem a lot easier than it really is."

"But look at the complexity of the relationships we developed. And the story stuff—it really is true that it unfolds if you focus relationship discoveries."

"I'm not in disagreement," said Kristin, smiling. "But what happened to flying without a net?"

"I know there's a lot of structure and a bunch of givens in the Henrys," I conceded. "But we're not preplanning story beats."

"Mark my words," Kristin said. "Improvising a one-act that takes place in real time in one place is going to be a lot harder than improvising twelve disjointed scenes in predetermined locations."

"And I think we put a lot of stuff together that's going to translate to one-acts," I said.

"No, all we did was establish one dramatic problem in each scene," Kristin said. "We skipped rising action, we skipped transformation, we skipped resolution. But no one cares, because it's all packaged in a way that's fun to do and fun to watch."

"I don't know if there's anything wrong with an enjoyable performance," I argued.

"But is it enjoyable only because we all know it's made up on the spot? Look at that 'gold' moment in Marty's scene," she said. "It's

hilarious because we know the improvisers got stuck. Applying the standard we'd apply to a real play—it would be intolerably cheesy."

"Speaking of plays, weren't you going to let me read one of yours?" I asked her.

Kristin hesitated, then said, "I think I'm afraid to let you see one."

"Oh, come on," I said. "I'll still like you even if your play sucks. Maybe I'll even like you more."

"I'm not sure what that means, but maybe I'll bring one next week," she said tentatively.

CHAPTER 10

Five-Minute Porch Plays

THE NEXT WEEK, GELLMAN TOLD us that we were going to work on improvising for five minutes in continuous time in one location, using an exercise he called Porch Plays.

"All of the plays will take place on a porch, and we will get just one suggestion from the audience—a specific location. Let's get four people up."

I decided to go first this time, so I went up along with Chad, Marty, and Emma. Someone called out our location—Aspen, Colorado.

"Begin with silence," Gellman said. "No exits. No entrances. Five minutes. And lights."

I suddenly felt overwhelmed that there were four of us onstage together. Then I knew I was up in my head and needed to find a point of concentration. I found it in some pine tree branches near the edge of the porch. They were dusted with snow. I tapped the bottom of the branch, and the snow flew off, dry and powdery.

I looked up at the others. Chad was enjoying a cup of coffee and the view. Emma was frowning at something on or near the floor. Marty was smiling and taking deep, measured breaths of air. No one looked at me, and I was frustrated. It was time to get something going in the scene. I tapped the branch again in frustration. No response.

"Hey!" I said, a little louder than I'd planned. "According to my observations," I tapped the branch again, "there's some pretty good powder out on those mountains."

Emma gave me a quick scowl and went back to whatever was on the floor. Marty smiled at me and went back to deep breathing. Chad took another swig of coffee.

"Great," I said sarcastically, and gave my branch a frustrated thwack. I looked at Emma, who was squatting and staring at the floor. "And what are you doing?" I asked, not even caring that I was breaking a dialogue rule.

"We wouldn't have bugs if you guys would pick up after yourselves," she said, standing up. "It's disgusting."

"Bugs exist in harmony with nature," Marty said sagely. "I accept that."

Chad just kept drinking his coffee.

I felt like I had to get something going, so I said to Emma, "You look nice in that sweater."

Emma looked surprised and pleased, so I decided to up the ante. "It brings out the color of your eyes. Very pretty."

Now Chad finally had something to say: "I love French roast."

Marty overlapped him, saying to me, "There you go again, always finding some girl to hit on."

The rest of our five minutes—which felt more like five hours—was more of the same. Finally, Gellman called time.

"Well, that didn't work," I said.

"Why?" asked Gellman.

Everyone onstage and in the audience was quick to point out what went wrong—our give-and-take was lousy, we overlapped each other, we pushed plot, we didn't connect to each other, we broke dialogue rules, and we got stuck and sank into long silences during which there were no discoveries.

"Is it because there were so many people onstage?" I asked. "We've been used to working in two-person scenes for a while now. I felt like I almost got something going with Emma at the begin-

ning, but then we lost it." I wanted to add that I thought that if I had just been improvising with Emma, I'm sure I could have gotten a real scene going, but I thought that would sound petty.

Gellman said, "Since we're not going to solve our problems by going to two-person scenes, let me show you something that will help you."

Gellman went to his book bag, rooted around, and pulled out a tennis ball. "In the beginning of any improvised play," he explained, "we have a group of characters in the environment that finds points of concentration. As the players explore and heighten their points of concentration into discovery and then reaction, usually one character emerges. Maybe that character is reacting more strongly, maybe that character is simply moving more. And then that character has the first line, whether that line is just one word or a sound or a whole sentence. That's the first focal point."

We all looked at him, I'm sure rather blankly.

"Let's go back to your original points of concentration on the porch," Gellman said.

We did as Gellman asked: I looked at the branch, Emma at the floor, Marty at the view, and Chad enjoyed his coffee.

"Good," Gellman side-coached. "I'm going to toss the ball to the character who has the scenic focus right now."

I actually raised my hand to catch the ball, and I was mortified when Gellman called out, "Marty, catch," and tossed the ball to him. Marty caught the ball and took a deep cleansing breath, but before he could speak, Gellman side-coached, "Okay, everyone else can explore and heighten this first point of scenic focus by riveting their full attention to Marty—now."

Everyone focused attention on Marty, who said, "I feel like I'm clearing the Chicago crap out of my lungs with every breath."

"Now," Gellman side-coached. "What will happen in the very next moment?"

I kept my mouth shut. I was still so embarrassed by the fact that I had reached for the ball.

Chad laughed and shook his head. Gellman said, “Chad, you just took the focus. Take the ball from Marty before you speak.”

Chad grabbed the ball, turned, and said to Emma, “I’m pleasantly buzzed by the altitude.”

“You’ve said that to Emma, so now the focus goes to her,” Gellman said.

Chad tossed the ball to Emma, who caught it. She smiled at Chad. Still crouched by the floor, she turned to the group at large and said, “I’m not going to be pleasantly buzzed by anything unless we clean this place up a bit.”

There was a pause. No one was sure what to do. Emma put the ball on the floor and stepped away from it.

“Don’t drop the ball—someone grab it!” Gellman urged.

I stepped forward, grabbed the ball, and said, “It’s beautiful here—come on!” Still holding onto the ball, I pulled Emma up from the floor and moved her toward the front of the porch. Marty and Chad watched. I tried to pass the ball to Emma.

“The focus is between you and Emma now, Geoff. See if you can keep it between you,” Gellman said.

Emma and I both held the ball as we looked out over the view. I had an arm around her. We looked at each other and smiled. Then Emma took the ball, broke away from me, and said, “I’m sorry, but a mess like that is a magnet for bugs.”

She took the ball with her, clutching it as she looked around for something to clean up the mess. She found a broom near the door.

Chad watched. As he took a breath to speak, Emma’s hand darted out, and she tossed the ball to Chad. She never even looked up and or stopped cleaning up the mess.

“I feel bad I’m not helping,” Chad said. “But I really don’t feel right in this altitude.”

We kept playing the scene for a couple more minutes, until we reached five minutes and Gellman called time. The scenic-focus ball helped a lot. It got the scene moving from moment to moment. But I still felt like we kept hitting plateaus—everyone more or less

chimed in a reaction to the current point of focus, then we'd pause, and then we'd start the process all over.

"I feel like we're missing something," Emma said when we had finished the exercise.

"You're not exploring and heightening enough," Gellman told her.

"It definitely helps to agree on who has the scenic focus," Marty said. "But I'm not always sure what I'm supposed to be exploring and heightening."

Gellman said, "You don't really have to worry about that unless you're holding the ball."

Marty nodded. He hesitated, then asked, "What do I explore and heighten if I am holding the ball?"

"That's entirely up to you. You're holding the ball," Gellman said. "But remember your foundation is your discoveries, whether it's your point of concentration, the other characters, something in the environment, or simply your own feelings or point of view."

"And how much do we explore and heighten? When do we know it's enough?" Aaron asked.

"You know when there's a transformation. Until that transformation, you haven't gone far enough," Gellman said.

For the next couple rounds of Porch Plays, other groups also worked with the tennis ball. Watching them, I didn't always agree with where the ball went, especially when someone tossed the ball to someone else. And watching the other groups, I also noticed that they had the same problem we had—that they could execute a strong beat, but they couldn't build from beat to beat. It felt like watching the beginning moments of a play over and over again for five minutes.

Every once in a while, someone was able to explore and heighten something to transformation within a beat. For example, Kristin and Dave had this great moment at a telescope. Kristin invited Dave to look through it, and as he did, she told him excitedly about what was happening in the sky. As she chattered, she moved closer to him and got more and more excited. And then Dave shifted away from

Kristin and put his hand up on the telescope, almost as a barrier to her closeness. He sensed that she was attracted to him, and he didn't like it. So they started this little beat as comfy friends and ended it with awkward, unrequited feelings. But that was it—the relationship thread vanished once they left the telescope.

After everyone had a chance to work with the scenic-focus ball, Gellman told us we were going to play another round of Porch Plays, only this time without the ball.

I went up in the last group with Kristin, Aaron, and Marty. The previous plays had gone well enough without the tangible support of the tennis ball for scenic focus, but there was still the same problem with the pieces overall—they just didn't build. I wasn't sure what we were doing wrong, and I wasn't sure why Gellman wasn't stopping us so that we could plug in the final piece we needed to do this better. After all, we had one more workshop session before the showcase.

I didn't have time to think about this, though, because someone had already suggested our location: Minneapolis, Minnesota. And then Gellman called, "Lights."

For a point of concentration, I found some frost on a windowpane—the light from inside the house played over the feathery patterns, and I enjoyed how pretty it was. I breathed onto it, enjoying how it melted.

I became aware that Kristin was agitated. I looked up at her, and I was surprised to see her smoking a cigarette. She gave me a defensive look and said, "I need it to settle my nerves."

Aaron coughed loudly behind me. He crossed in front of me and opened the window.

"I'm allergic to cigarette smoke," he said. I, in turn, slammed the window shut again.

"I'm allergic to pneumonia," I said.

Kristin shrugged in a mocking way, and that ticked off Aaron, who went and sat in the corner. He picked up a bottle and took a long swig.

Marty hadn't said anything yet. One by one we all looked at him. He was sitting off to the side, balancing a plate of food on his knees. There was another pause while we watched Marty wolf down food. Suddenly, fork in midair, he stopped chewing. He looked upstage toward the house. We all watched Marty watching the house. Then he finished chewing, swallowed, and said, "They're still fighting in there."

I kept looking at Marty, but he was absorbed in his food again, apparently tuning out the noises in the house. Then Kristin, Aaron, and I looked at each other, registering fear and sadness in each other's faces.

Aaron turned back to Marty and watched him eat. Marty looked up at him.

"That looks good," Aaron said.

"It is," said Marty, shifting his body slightly to guard his plate.

Kristin dramatically waved her cigarette upstage. "Oh yeah, a buffet full of gorgeous food," she declared, taking a big drag off of her cigarette. "It's freezing out here."

"I'll give you a coupla swigs for some," Aaron offered to Marty. Marty scowled at him and shifted even more. Aaron angrily took a swig. "Fine. More for me," he said.

"Well, I got nothing," I announced. "I'm out here with nothing." I noticed that I still had the focus, so I kept going. But rather than make up a bunch of story points about the fight inside the house—which I was tempted to do—I stuck with what I had introduced. I explored and heightened my point of view as though it were the Postcards exercise.

"I'm out here without food, without drink, no smokes, no drugs, no coat, not even a sweater! Nothing to numb my pain. Except for the fact that it's forty below, and this is a three-season porch—which in Minnesota, makes it a one-season porch. So with any luck, I'll just go to sleep, and you'll find my frozen, blissfully unaware body in the spring."

That was it. That transformed the mood onstage. Everyone was

still looking at me, but now there was more of a feeling of camaraderie among the four of us.

Kristin sighed. "I hate hiding from their fights," she said. No one said anything. Aaron took another pull off of his drink, Marty kept eating, and I blew on my frozen hands.

"Just ignore me," Kristin said. "I'm not saying anything."

"There's not much to say. We all hate it," I said firmly.

"Complaining about it isn't going to make it any better," Marty said, shoveling in the food.

Aaron got an alarmed look on his face and jumped up. We all looked at him.

"Shh," he said, and went upstage to listen intently at the door. We listened, too, but Aaron was the only one actually at the door. His face changed as he listened in vain, and then he heard something definite. He looked at all of us, and he looked sad.

"I don't hear anything," I said.

"She's crying," said Aaron.

We all retreated back to where we had been at the beginning of the scene. I even went back to melting frost. Aaron was drinking, and Marty was eating. Kristin took a last drag off of her cigarette and stamped it out.

"At least the fight's over," she said.

"For now," Marty said.

And then Gellman called out, "Five minutes."

I felt great, like we had finally broken through. And Gellman thought so, too, because he said, "Well, that was a nice little play. Well done."

Then he turned to the audience and asked, "What was it about?"

"Marty's character," said Chad. "He was clearly the one who was most damaged by what was happening."

"I thought it was about Geoff's character," said Sarah. "He was the one who seemed most aware and most in control."

"In a larger sense, I think it was about addiction," Emma said quickly. "They all had something to numb their pain—everyone

except Geoff. And he seemed to want something. He mentioned drugs."

"I thought it was about how American families are typically dysfunctional. Here they all were at Thanksgiving having a rotten time," Chad said.

"How did you know it was Thanksgiving?" Aaron asked. "I didn't even know that."

"Someone said it," Chad said.

We all looked at each other and shook our heads.

"I don't think anyone did," Gellman said. "But isn't that interesting? I inferred that it was Thanksgiving, too. And that these were siblings, or cousins, and the people inside fighting were the generation above them—parents, or an aunt and uncle."

Everyone else nodded in agreement. That had been more or less what I was assuming, too.

"Isn't it interesting how much expositional information gets communicated in behavior as opposed to dialogue?" Gellman pointed out.

"I think," Kristin said thoughtfully, "that the reason that went so much better is because we had a controlling idea."

"It went better," said Gellman, "because you applied all of the principles we've learned."

"No," said Kristin. She didn't sound argumentative—she was trying to think this out. "I think when you said 'Minneapolis,' we all thought freezing cold, so we didn't have to spend early beats in the scene discovering that it was cold. And then when Marty heard the fighting, we had something vivid and emotional to hook into together."

"I think the reason these other plays have struggled so much is that they're disjointed," Chad said. "This last one wasn't because they all made a choice to make the play about the fight inside the house."

"That's playwriting," Gellman said. "If you follow scenic focus, you'll get a play. If you start writing it while you're improvising, you won't be able to sustain it past five minutes or so. This work is not about making choices."

"It's really not," Marty chimed in. "I didn't choose to make the play about the fight."

"Me either," said Aaron.

"But everyone focusing on the fight made this play work, somehow," Kristin said, puzzled. "How do you know—or how can you learn—to focus on the central thing that will tie the play together from beat to beat?"

And then Marty offered this: "I think you know when it's big enough. And it only gets big enough if everything else is in place."

"Tell us what you mean when you say 'big enough,'" Gellman asked Marty.

"Big—that's not the best word. Strong. Important. Important—it has to be important," Marty said.

"Yes," Gellman said. "But here's the paradox—what makes it important is applying yet another one of the principles: 'Yes, and. . . .'"

"Oh!" Kristin said, drawing in a breath. "It would have fallen flat if we hadn't taken it in and reacted."

"It also would have fallen flat if all of you hadn't given me the scenic focus so clearly and completely. So, by the way, thank you," said Marty.

"It doesn't matter what the thing is," Kristin said slowly. "As long as everyone commits to it, agrees to it, and heightens it. The reason the other plays didn't work is because everybody kept shopping for the important thing. So each beat was ultimately about abandoning what had just been discovered."

"Right," said Gellman. "It's only ever as important as the people onstage make it."

"I got that during my mini monologue," I said. "I stuck with what I knew, that I was on a cold porch, there was a fight inside, and I didn't have any of the comforts you guys had. The deeper I went into that, the more I felt how much I wanted relief from the pain I felt."

The next class was lining up in the aisle of the theater again. We'd gone over our allotted time.

"Next week, we'll improvise the one-acts," Gellman said. "And that night is the showcase, seven o'clock."

As we walked out, I caught up with Kristin and asked her if she had finally brought a play for me to read.

"I printed one out last night, but then I left it at home. I'll bring it next week," she said.

"You want to go grab coffee?" I asked.

She blushed a little and said, "Oh, I'd love to, but I can't. I'm meeting up with some people. I'm sorry."

So I ended up walking to the Brown Line with Marty. We were quiet at first. I was thinking about Kristin. I didn't like the idea that I might not see her again after next week. Maybe that's why I wanted her to give me one of her scripts, so I'd have an excuse to call her. And then I thought, somewhat miserably, that maybe that was why she kept putting me off. That and making plans to see someone right after class, when we'd been in the habit of hanging out a bit. She was giving me the brush-off. Well, that was her right, I figured.

I turned my attention to Marty. "So, you were amazing today," I said.

"We all were," he said. "We were in the flow."

"How can you even talk about going off to be a schoolteacher? You can do this," I said.

"I'm not just talking anymore," Marty said. "I got accepted to a drama therapy program, and I'll be moving to Oregon at the end of the year."

I started thinking of all of the things I could say to Marty—I could encourage him, tell him he was a wimp, point out that he was getting better—but instead what came out was, "Dammit, Marty, I'm going to miss you."

He grinned and said, "Yeah, well, Oregon is a cool place to visit. And I know I'll need a place to crash when I come here."

"For the record," I said, "I think you're great onstage."

"I appreciate that," Marty said. "But I have to face facts. My

classmates like me. My teachers like me. But an audience of people who don't know what a nice guy I am—they couldn't care less."

I started to protest, but Marty stopped me.

"No—it's good, really. When I finally stopped worrying about what I don't have and instead thought about what I do have, it got very clear. I love this work. It has transformed me. I want to learn more about that, and I want to share it. That is my path. So don't feel sorry for me."

"I don't," I said.

"You, on the other hand," Marty said. "You're an actor. It's clearly what you're meant to do, and you'll never be happy doing anything else."

"So you can go ahead and feel sorry for me," I said.

"I do," Marty said, smiling.

CHAPTER 11

Here, There Be Dragons

THE NEXT WEEK, EVERYONE CAME into the workshop tense because we knew we had the showcase that night. It didn't feel like a workshop at all—it felt like a pressured rehearsal for a big production that was behind schedule. Then Chad announced that two of the TourCo directors were coming to the showcase. He had gone through the Conservatory with both of them several years earlier, and they were all still friends. Then Aaron said he'd sent an email to the director of talent development for Second City—Aaron had been called back for the last round of TourCo auditions, and the next round of auditions were coming up in a month. And then Sarah told us that her agent said she'd come, specifically because she was looking to add clients to send out on films.

The pressure got to me, along with everyone else. All of a sudden I started thinking that this little showcase could be a real opportunity to get seen by some important people in an intimate setting. We were doing edgy, interesting, very artistic stuff. It could really open some doors. And then I started to think about TourCo auditions coming up again. I felt like I'd learned a lot in the last year—would the director of talent development be impressed?

It would be an understatement to say that our one-acts didn't go very well. We did four rounds of them, with three or

four of us in each one. Gellman let each of them go for twenty or twenty-five minutes. None of them came to any kind of definitive conclusion. Gellman just called lights at the end of each one, probably out of exhaustion.

In mine, I worked with Chad, Sarah, and Emma. We were supposed to be two couples celebrating Chad's birthday. I was so unfocused that I flirted with Emma through the whole thing, thinking that Sarah was my wife and that flirting would stir up some drama. But the other three had it in their heads that Emma was my wife. And then there was this whole horrible chunk in the middle where we tried to hint at each other about the specifics of the relationships and then rationalize and explain our confusion. It was so bad that Gellman didn't even side-coach us through it. I don't know what he would have been able to tell us, anyway.

Kristin's group did a little better. She went up with Aaron and Dave. Gellman side-coached them pretty heavily, though. I don't know if they would have been able to keep it together without Gellman telling them to go back to silence or directing their attention toward the scenic focus or encouraging them to explore and heighten a specific element.

They did get something resembling a play, with a bit of a beginning, middle, and end, but it felt a little too much like a soap opera. Kristin was married to Aaron, and Dave was her brother. Dave was visiting them, and he wasn't feeling well—it turned out there was something wrong with his kidneys. He'd lost his job, and he needed help to pay for his dialysis treatments. But then we found out Kristin was pregnant and planning on quitting her job. They spent a little too much time talking about all of this stuff. It was more interesting when I could see how they felt about each other, namely that Aaron was threatened by Dave, and Kristin was protective of Dave.

When he debriefed all of the plays, Gellman reminded us how well it went when we stayed with the principles: point of concentration, dialogue rules, point of view dialogue, and scenic focus.

"I wish we'd had more time to practice this," Aaron said.

I know I was feeling the same way. I was also feeling like we were going to look like idiots, and I didn't want to look like an idiot if there were important or influential people coming to the show.

"You always want more time," Gellman said.

"I think we should just do Henry plays for the showcase tonight," Chad suggested. An excited hum went through the group—we were saved. Why hadn't anyone else thought of that?

"We were great at the Henry plays!" Sarah exclaimed.

"They're really enjoyable," added Dave. "That'll make a great showcase."

"But it's kind of a letdown," Marty said. "We spent all of this time working to improvise one-acts."

"We don't have a handle on it, though," said Chad. "I say we do something we know we're good at."

At that point, we all looked to Gellman. He hadn't offered his opinion. He was just sitting in his chair, listening to us. He looked thoughtful, and I thought a little tired.

"Would you let us do the Henrys?" Aaron asked tentatively.

"If that's what you really want to do, I don't see much value in telling you no," Gellman said. "But if you want to do Henrys because you don't know if the one-acts will work, well, that's improvisation. Of course you don't know if it's going to work. You have all of the tools. You've experienced enough success to know what works and what doesn't in a rehearsal. An audience will feed you more information about that. That was the intention of the showcase."

"I say we do the one-acts," Kristin said. That surprised me a little. I thought she would have preferred the safety of the Henry structure.

"And I say we give the audience a good show," said Chad.

The room broke out into argument at this point. Gellman stood up and quieted us.

"This is always a difficult gap to get across, the gap between process and product. And I'll confess that we're off the map, out in

the part where it says, 'Here, there be dragons.' In past projects, we've spent several weeks putting together structures to get a performance up. We've worked with playwrights. We've written scenarios. We've developed elaborate outlines. We've created detailed characters in advance. And on a few occasions, we've simply gone out and improvised out of whole cloth. So, ultimately, it's up to you. But I will say this—it is the right of every artist to work in process. And the opportunities to do so without the pressure of creating product are few and far between. Where else but here would you get a shot at attempting anything this risky?"

The group was silent for a few moments.

Then Marty said, "What I think we're all saying here is that we're afraid. And I think that's awesome."

"It's only awesome if we face the fear," Aaron said. "I'm in for the one-acts."

In the end, everyone did the improvised one-acts, although Chad was sulky about it. Emma, Marty, Kristin, and I were assigned to the last group to go up in the showcase, and I was really happy that I was going to perform with them.

It was hard to go up last, though. That night, I had too much time to pace around backstage. The first group finished, and then the second group went on. Chad and Aaron were in this second group, and the audience laughed a lot. But listening to them, I thought they were going for easy laughs and not exactly following the process. I didn't want to listen to them anymore, so I went back into the greenroom, where Kristin was stretching.

"Where'd Marty and Emma go?" I asked.

"They're backstage left," Kristin said. She stopped stretching and approached me. "We should probably get into place. And, hey—this probably isn't a good time, but here." She shoved a tan mailing envelope into my hands, and from the weight and feel of it, I knew it held her script.

"You're really going to let me read this?" I asked her.

"Be kind," she said, wringing her hands and smiling broadly. "Honest, but kind."

"That's me," I said. "Or at least that's what I'm aspiring to be—honest, but kind."

"Well, me too," Kristin said.

"I'll give this a good read, I promise. And then we can get together and talk about it?" I asked.

"Yeah, that would be good," she said. I wondered briefly if we were making a date, but then we heard applause from the theater. I quickly stashed Kristin's play in my backpack and followed her into the darkness backstage.

In place backstage, I could hear Gellman introducing us. I was surprised by how hard my heart was pounding. I took a few deep breaths to steady myself and stole a glance onstage. Gellman was a shadowy figure outlined in blazing light. Past him, in the shadows of the house, was the audience. I could see the director of talent development looking at her program. I saw the TourCo directors. I saw one of the Second City producers.

I heard Gellman say, "We need a single suggestion. A location."

People in the audience called things out. Gellman said, loudly enough so that we could hear him, "I heard someone suggest a vegetable garden."

The lights went out. I stepped onto the stage. The TourCo directors were sitting house left. I wanted them to like me. I wanted to forget that they were there.

Marty, Emma, and Kristin were with me in the darkness; I trusted them.

I felt the audience as a singular entity. I breathed with them.

The lights went up.

I looked down and saw a trowel.

I grabbed it.

It was covered with rich, damp earth.

I felt happy.

I looked up and saw Kristin.
She turned to me and smiled.
And I thought, "There is no place I would rather be—now."

Afterword

THIS BOOK ENDS WITH THE WORKSHOP participants about to perform their first improvised one-act play in front of an audience. It ends there because that is the end of their classroom work. Their public performance is a trial by fire and an important part of their training process.

There are gaps throughout this process, as there are in all artistic endeavors. And the gap between the learning process and creating product is always a challenge. It doesn't matter whether you are in the fine arts, performing arts, or the literary arts—all artists must struggle with the gaps between artistic theory and presentation, whether that presentation is a symphony, a painting, a play, a performance, or, of course, a book. However, it is by struggling with these gaps that we come to realize this most important idea: only when we are fully aware that everything is exactly as it should be in the moment can we touch the divine, and only when we are in acceptance of the here and now can we give our audiences our best work.

This book is for actors. The journey described in this book is just one way to train actors for either improvisation or working with text. It works for both because when we are playing a character, trying to convince others we are someone else, we are acting. It doesn't matter whether we have a script or not. It doesn't matter whether we have rehearsed or not. It doesn't matter whether we are on a stage or in the street or even in our neighborhood bakery. Acting is acting is acting, and if people believe we are who we say

we are, it is considered to be good acting. Most modern acting methods encourage a belief system that incorporates character, environment, circumstance, and so forth. Viola Spolin said, "Show—don't tell." When an actor can believe in what is imagined and can show us what that is with clarity and truth, then he or she has done the job well and true.

This book is also for teachers. The workshop leader in Geoff's story is also on a journey and is forming his own process. He doesn't always have the answers, and in the end, he must let his students find their own way across the gap. Those of us fortunate enough to teach the craft of acting and share our experience with students must be willing to simply say, "I don't know." In short, we should live as our students do, exploring and heightening our work until it leads to transformation.

Is it possible for those of us exploring our various crafts to understand and accept the idea that all of us are on a sacred journey? A quest to discover the divine in our work, in our world, and in ourselves? That may seem corny, perhaps naive, maybe even pretentious. But is it? In this book, the student-actors and the workshop leader are changed through their pursuit of a process for advanced improvisation. By going back to the basics to establish a foundation for discovery, exploring step-by-step what is known about the work, and, finally, pushing into the unknown, the participants in this workshop were able to transform their work and themselves.

Appendix

IN THE FOLLOWING PAGES, WE OFFER a brief history of some key productions in which long-form improvisation was utilized to create public performance. We have included the text from the programs of those productions, which includes descriptions of the productions and what the goals were, program notes, directors' comments, playwrights' comments, cast and crew lists, and mission statements. In the case of the Experimental Wing of Theatre Works, we provide brief descriptions of some of the exercises created by that group for performance.

Windy City Workshop

The Windy City Workshop was the first group to perform improvised one-act plays, which were performed at Crosscurrents.

Untitled One-Act Plays

WINDY CITY WORKSHOP CAST
Gretchen Albrecht
Timothy S. Ferguson
Tom Hanigan
John Harrington
John Michael Michalski

Deb Quentel
Anne Wendell
Ron West

STAGE MANAGER: Samuel S. Shuster
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR: Donna Dalesandro
DIRECTOR: Michael J. Gellman

Our Program Statement

Perhaps one of the oldest forms of theater, improvisation was integral to ancient ritual and storytelling. In its current form, improvisation is rarely recognized as an acceptable discipline within the modern literary theater—the theater that explores human existence. Improvisation has, in fact, been thought of as a subclass of theater, often relegated to nightclubs and cabarets. Over the years, even the word *improvisation* has been synonymous with comedy and comedy revue—a limiting definition for such an ancient and diverse craft.

Recently, a company of actors was formed to explore the potential of long-form improvisation. This pioneer company has laid the foundation for the Windy City Workshop, a theatrical workshop involved in the process of discovery—finding new improvisational techniques for performance.

These workshop performances are presented as an ongoing experiment open to and for the public. We thank you for participating in what we hope will be an exciting new theatrical adventure—a theater to celebrate improvisation.

The following are three examples of how we used long-form improvisation to develop theater for performance in Chicago over the past several years. The first is Theatre Works, where we worked on all-improvised performances. The second is the Or-

ganic Theater, where we worked with playwrights. And the third is The Second City Training Center, where we created cast-developed plays from scenarios.

Theatre Works

The Theatre Works group—in particular the cast of the Experimental Wing of Theatre Works—performed fully improvised plays and also generated some very intriguing performance forms, some of which are described in this book. Those forms include:

HENRY: Creating a small town by improvising scenes between characters who live there. (A simple, pared-down version is used in the workshop in *Process.*)

PORCH PLAYS: Named after Jeff Sweets's play *Porch.* As the name implies, they are short, five- to thirty-minute plays without entrances or exits that take place on a porch.

POSTCARDS: Three- to five-minute scenes with characters who are on vacation together. At the end of the scene, the group is frozen in time as if in a vacation snapshot. Then the audience selects a character from the scene to step out of the photo and send a verbal postcard to someone back home.

The Wing also created a few other games that might be worth mentioning:

DUNGEONS: A narration game that employs a split-stage technique. A king and a prisoner (who has been condemned to death) are in a dungeon cell. The king has a compelling reason to want to pardon the prisoner and is there to hear the prisoner's story. As the story unfolds, we see the scenes enacted in the other playing areas. The fun of dungeons is that

the narrators never dictate story to the players, and the players never improvise story for the narrators.

QUEST GAME: Inspired by Joseph Campbell's work, this game, as the Wing created and performed it, has seven stations or environments, suggested by the audience, scattered throughout the theater. Each of the environments has one or two characters visible to the audience who keep their environment going for the entire play. A hero and his entourage travel through the audience from station to station seeking something of great power suggested by the audience at the beginning of each show.

BOY MEETS GIRL / BOY LOSES GIRL / BOY GETS GIRL: As the name suggests, this is a series of three scenes, with the same characters and using as a scenario the oldest plot structure in the world. The point of the game is to build story by exploring and heightening relationships.

Cast of the Experimental Wing of Theatre Works

1984–85
Chicago

Shirley Anderson
Alan Baranowski
Kenny Bernstein
Norm Booth
Norm Boucher
Robert Bowman
Mark Czoske
Cynthia Desmond
Pamela Donahue
Denise Dunn

Mary Beth Glasgow
Hillary Haft
Ayun Halliday
Chris Hewlit
Emily Hooper
Cal Mason
Robb Michael
Bill McGough
Claire Partin
Deb Quintel
Jill Shely
Tina Sigel
Steve Rosen
Mark Vallarta
Janet Van Wess

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR: Kent Nicholson
DIRECTOR: Michael J. Gellman

The Organic Theater

At the Organic we had an opportunity to bring together improvisational actors trained in advanced improvisation and writers who were interested in developing new plays. We ended up completing three different projects with sixteen writers: playwrights, journalists, poets, and improvisers. Two of the shows were *The Seed Show: Untitled #1* and *The Seed Show: Untitled #2*.

The first seed show was designed to create ten short plays in order to explore many different approaches for combining improviser and writer. The second seed show was an effort to create an evening of one-act plays instead of ten short pieces. Using the same process as the first seed show, we developed three plays.

The Seed Show: Untitled #1

February 1986

ACT 1

Eine Kleine Theatricale by Alan Gross
The Ensemble

An Immigrant's Dream by Rick Cleveland
Michael Raysses

Canis Lupis Loop De Loo by Judy Morgan
Elizabeth Shepherd, Mark Herzog, Alizon Elliot, Charles Hartsock, Bernadette O'Malley, Rick Prell, Amy Morton Edwards

The Piece by Deb Lacusta and Dan Castellaneta
Judy Nielsen, Steve Carver

EL Scene by Sherry Narens
Alizon Elliot, Elizabeth Shepherd, Charles Hartsock, Anne Wendell, Rick Prell, Mark Herzog, Amy Morton Edwards, Michael Raysses, Doug Stevenson

ACT 2

The Pursuit of Happiness by Nicholas A. Patricca
Mark Herzog, Rick Prell, Bernadette O'Malley, Anne Wendell, Michael Raysess, Judy Nielsen, Steve Carver

Roof by Rick Cleveland
Charles Hartsock, Steve Carver, Michael Raysess, Doug Stevenson, Anne Wendell

On the Rack by Steven Ivich
Alizon Elliot, Amy Morton Edwards, Judy Nielson, Bernadette O'Malley, Elizabeth Shepherd

Pads by Jamie Swise
Steve Carver, Anne Wendell, Doug Stevenson

Park Gardens by Chris Barnes and Barbara Thomas
The Ensemble

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR: Brad Wright
DIRECTOR: Michael J. Gellman

From the Director (Program Note for *Untitled #1*)

While directing in Toronto, I was introduced to the folks at Theatre Passe Muraille, Canada's premiere collective theater. For the past ten years, the directors of Passe Muraille have been uniting playwrights and actors trained in improvisation. By introducing the directors to these artists, a triad is formed for the purpose of collaborating in developmental rehearsals.

We hope our seed show will launch a new wave of collective theater, encouraging both established and aspiring playwrights to develop new works.

The Seed Show: Untitled #2

1987

THE CAST
Molly Anker
Steven Carell
Pamela Donahue
Charles Hartsock II

Judy Nielson
David Razowsky

Omnioptics by Deb Lacusta and Dan Castellaneta
The Dollmaker by Jean Howard
Private Dancing by Michael Miner

ASSISTANT DIRECTOR: Anne Libera
DIRECTOR: Michael J. Gellman

Notes from the Playwrights

JEAN HOWARD

When Michael Gellman invited me to participate as one of the writers for *The Seed Show,* I was so intrigued by the process and the possibilities (especially as these related to my own processes) that curiosity alone prompted me to accept.

Coming from a background strong in poetry, where the mere distillation and controlling of words becomes the essence of your work, it was hard for me to imagine improvisational freedom. Though I'm sure, too, Gellman himself was entirely sure of how it would work.

When Michael Gellman played havoc with *The Dollmaker* by sending his troupe of improvisationalists into her bedroom, their creation became so full, so well timed and intricate, that I had to take back my stubborn insistence that only two characters make up this play.

These stubborn moments of lost control were worth enduring in exchange for the moments of brilliance. I sat in the dark perimeter of the rehearsal stage absorbing as six skilled actors blew their own unique life experiences into the body of my play. I came to realize how valuable this improvisational process could be to a playwright. It allows her to watch her concept grow,

unchecked by her own limits of knowledge, into previously unimagined directions. It also provides her with the immediate physical manifestation of her ideas explored before her eyes, an opportunity that is unmatched for its information and gauge of vitality. The process is a powerful and extremely potential tool. I am glad that it has found its way into my work.

MICHAEL MINER

Imagine yourself Joe Kahn, a columnist whose only reality is his column, a columnist who gets up every morning and re-creates himself, writing a Joe Kahn kind of column in a Joe Kahn kind of way. Imagine yourself a reporter whose devotion to his subjects is total—who recognizes that his subjects' lives are the only proof that his own exists. Such ardor these subjects deserve!—until the column is published and they totally cease to matter.

Compare Joe Kahn to an actor who is little other than his characters, or a Mr. Goodbar who falls wholeheartedly in love with whoever attracts him that night. Such were the ideas—half formed, I must add, at various points, barely comprehensible—that I brought to Michael Gellman and the cast of *The Seed Show.* Fortunately, there were some epiphanies and the cast improvised brilliantly. I am lucky enough to have my name attached to something it was not in my power individually to write.

DEB LACUSTA AND DAN CASTELLANETA

Omnioptics is a play, but then that's only on one level of reality. For us it was the end result of a process—a process in which a collaboration of random elements is shaken up enough to form a pattern or, in this case, a story.

At various points along the way, elements were introduced by the roll of the dice, the flip of the coin, or through some other randomizing force. Ultimately the play began to take shape with six different character descriptions we had created. These descriptions

contained little more than enough information to get them going. They were instilled with philosophies, goals, dreams, and a number of idiosyncrasies. Gaps in their personas were intentionally left in at the outset because we knew to anticipate that each actor-improviser would be bringing some of themselves to the parts.

And they did. They brought the ideas of these characters to life. They improvised through a number of situations and starts to scenes which we supplied until a story began to develop. We had a rough idea about what we wanted to say, but we kept our minds open and incorporated what we saw. We continuously fed the ensemble with ideas, and they continued to open our eyes to new, unexplored territories.

Being improvisers ourselves, we knew that wonderful things can happen which no writer could possibly dream up alone and hunched over a typewriter. We continue to believe that improvisation can take us far beyond the sketch comedy form as writers. The structure is usable in creating dramatic, lengthier works as well as full-length plays, television, and film material. This production of *Omnioptics* has assured us in these beliefs.

Director's Note

This year's seed show began with the theme of freedom versus security and culminated in the three one-act plays you're seeing this evening. Creating plays from scratch, as we've attempted here through working together in the collaborative processes of improvisation, is always a challenging and often exhausting effort. But the experience remains an intensely enjoyable one.

We hope you share (or come to share) our enthusiasm for the process and the potential these seed shows have proven to suggest. And we hope that you enjoy the fruits of our labor. Thank you for coming and supporting the Chicago theater community.

—Michael J. Gellman

The Second City Training Center

The Quest

December 1996
Second City Skybox Studio Theatre

Director's Note

The Quest is the final project of a ten-week workshop. This workshop was based on my long-held desire to explore three areas: Joseph Campbell's outline for story development, the creation of an event-style theater which surrounds the audience, and a method of advanced-level improvisational training for the theater. This production is improvised from an outline scenario developed by the cast. We hope you enjoy it.

—Michael J. Gellman

Note to the Audience

Cultural anthropologist Joseph Campbell was fascinated by the idea that every man experiences the same dreams and embarks on a heroic journey laden with archetypal figures who teach him the lessons which can ultimately lead to wisdom. This is a promenade show, so please travel with us on our heroic journey. (Note: The audience followed the actor playing the hero from scene to scene through ten separate areas on the fourth floor of The Second City Training Center in Chicago.)

ACT 1
The Festival
Town Meeting (call to adventure)

The Campfire (through the threshold)
Toll Booth
Underground (the belly of the whale)
Michigan Avenue (the journey continues)

The Party and Intermission

ACT 2
The Alley
The Playroom (the mother goddess, bliss of infancy)
Piano Bar (the temptress)
The Court (the atonement with the father)
The Wedding (apotheosis)
Death (resurrection)
The Return

WRITTEN AND PERFORMED BY
Aaron Baar
Robert Barton
Mary Jo Bolduc
Wayne Camp
Andy Cobb
Juliet Curry
Jennifer Hogan
Cesar Jamie
Maggie Kelly
Kelly Huston Kreglow
Tom Lewin
Anne Libera
Amy Loftus
Morgan Mahoney
Vanessa Hall McCune
Lucia Johnson McQueeny
Trevor Parker

Jennifer Rule
John Stefani

ASSISTANT STAGE MANAGERS: Joe Nunez, Cordell Pace
STAGE MANAGER: Jason Flowers
MUSICAL DIRECTORS: Darrell Barber, Joe Tech
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR: Sheryl Johnston
DIRECTOR: Michael J. Gellman

In 2005, there was a group of actors at The Second City Training Center that worked fearlessly for months in workshops and then in two separate performances. One was a series of improvised one-act plays, and then there was an evening of developed one-act plays titled *Show in Process*. The workshop in this book was inspired by the cast of *Show in Process*.

Show in Process

CAST MEMBERS
Lloyd Collins
Erica Elam
Claudia Rose Golde
Joe Janes
Thomas Middleditch
Kelli Nonnemacher
Chip Reid
Aemilia Scott
Karen Shuman
Blaine Swen
Joel Vining
Ali Weiss

VIDEOGRAPHER / DESIGNER: Robert Olmedo
STAGE MANAGER: Rebecca Grossman
ASSISTANT DIRECTOR: Peyton Daley
DIRECTOR: Michael J. Gellman
PRODUCER: Alison Royer

Suggestions for Further Reading

Spolin, Viola. 1936. *Improvisation for the Theater: A Handbook of Teaching and Directing Techniques.* Evanston, Illinois: Northwestern University Press.

Stanislavski, Constantin. 1936. *An Actor Prepares.* Trans. Elizabeth R. Hapgood. Toronto: Theatre Arts Books.

Ward, Winifred. 1939. *Theatre for Children.* New York: D. Appleton and Company.

Ward, Winifred. 1947. *Playmaking with Children: From Kindergarten to High School.* New York: D. Appleton and Company.

"*While nothing can replace the enviable experience of being in one of Michael Gellman's workshops, this book goes a long way toward conveying many of the key lessons to be learned from him. They are lessons that are useful not only in creating improvised scenes, but in writing and—dare I say it—in having productive encounters with your fellow human beings. Anybody who has Spolin, Sills, Close, and Johnstone on their shelves will want to make room for this book.*"

—*Jeffrey Sweet, author of* "The Value of Names" and Other Plays

Modeled after the timeless *An Actor Prepares* by Konstantin Stanislavsky, *Process* introduces readers to Geoff, a fictional young actor taking a class based on author Michael J. Gellman's real-life workshops. Geoff, who has just moved to Chicago to pursue an acting career, undergoes the standard trials of audition and rejection before he takes the advice of a fellow actor and turns to improv classes at The Second City. At first Geoff thinks improvisation is about laughs and loosening up, but he soon learns that it is a powerful tool for traditional actors as well as a craft in and of itself. Through Geoff's experience, readers discover key tenets of improvisation: concentration, visualization, focus, object work, being in the moment, and the crucial "yes, and."

MARY SCRUGGS is an actress, director, playwright, and educator. She is currently the head of writing and education programs at The Second City Training Center in Chicago.

MICHAEL J. GELLMAN is the head of The Second City New York program. He was a resident company member of The Second City Chicago for three years and has directed at The Second City since 1980. In addition to The Second City Training Center, Gellman has taught at Columbia College Chicago, Northern Illinois University, and Artistic New Directions.

ANNE LIBERA is the executive artistic director for The Second City Training Centers, the head of Columbia College Chicago's comedy studies program, and the author of *The Second City Almanac of Improvisation*.

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